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Coercive Brokerage: Paramilitaries, Illicit Economies and Organised Crime in the Frontiers of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar

Working Paper II

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Contents

Acronyms and abbreviations	4
Summary	5
1. Introduction	8
2. Definitions and methods	10
2.1. Definitions	10
2.2. Case study selection	11
2.3. Methods	12
3. Case studies	14
3.1. Afghanistan	14
3.2. Colombia	26
3.3. Myanmar	35
4. Coercive brokerage and the crime-politics nexus: comparative analysis	45
4.1. Comparative analysis: towards a comparative research agenda	45
4.2. Contextual variables	46
4.3. Violence/coercive power and public authority	47
4.4. Illicit economies and organised crime	48
4.5. Politics and the organised crime connection	50
5. Conclusion	52
5.1. What is the relationship between coercive brokers, public authority and frontier governance?	52
5.2. How, and with what effects, do paramilitaries become involved with illicit economies and organised crime?	54
5.3. What is the relationship between paramilitaries, organised crime and politics?	56
References	58

Acronyms and abbreviations

ALP	Afghan Local Police
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ATA	Afghan Territorial Army
AUC	United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia
BCB	Bloque Central Bolívar
BGF	Border Guard Force
BSP	Bloque Sur Putumayo
CNMH	National Center of Historical Memory of Colombia
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
KDA	Kachin Defense Army
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KNU	Karen National Union
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
NDS	National Directorate of Security
NLD	National League for Democracy
PGMD	Pro-Government Militias Database
PMF	People's Militia Force
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
SAC	State Administration Control

Summary

This paper is the second in a three-part series analysing the nexus between paramilitaries, illicit economies and organised crime in borderland and frontier regions. These papers challenge two dominant policy narratives around paramilitaries. First, the idea that these organisations are symptomatic of state breakdown and they flourish in marginal spaces suffering from ‘governance deficits’. Second, the idea that paramilitaries can primarily be understood as apolitical, predatory and self-enriching actors, driven by economic motives, and operating outside formal political systems.

In critiquing these narratives, we advance an alternative approach that seeks to understand how paramilitaries become embedded in enduring systems of rule in borderlands, shaped by protracted conflict and illicit economies. In such contexts, paramilitaries often become pivotal players as violent intermediaries or ‘coercive brokers’, whose identity and roles are defined by their positionality in occupying key synapses, or points of friction, connecting the international, national and local levels; the centre and periphery; state and society. This analytical lens provides an entry point for exploring how violence and organised crime becomes embedded in the functioning of states and markets in contested borderlands, rather than simply being indicative of state failure and underdevelopment in these regions.

The first paper in this series (accessible here <https://www.socace-research.org.uk/publications/socace-rp26-coercive-brokerage-wp1>) conceptualises coercive brokerage and outlines how this concept advances the growing body of recent literature on militias and paramilitaries. This second paper then works with the concept of coercive brokerage to present comparative analysis of the paramilitary-organised crime nexus in three contexts: Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar. The third paper outlines a set of policy implications based on the key findings from across the case studies.

Together, the three papers explore four interconnected questions and lines of enquiry:

- 1 What is the relationship between coercive brokers, public authority and frontier governance?** We explore how, and with what effects, paramilitaries relate to and become embedded in forms of state and non/para/anti-state forms of rule in the margins.
- 2 How, and with what effects, do paramilitaries become involved with illicit economies and organised crime?** We are interested in the pathways through which paramilitaries enter, extend and consolidate their roles in exploiting and regulating illicit (and licit) markets.
- 3 What is the relationship between paramilitaries, organised crime and politics?** Rather than viewing illicit economies/criminal activities as incompatible with – or in opposition to – politics, we look at examples where the former have provided a springboard into the latter. We study the pathways through which engagement in illicit activities may (or may not) lead to particular forms, or ways of ‘doing’, politics.
- 4 What policies or policy combinations can more effectively address the phenomenon of coercive brokerage in conflict-affected borderlands?** This is a

significant policy challenge given the fact that some of the world's poorest and most marginalised communities live in regions shaped by paramilitary rule, whilst the criminal activities that sustain these groups have complex diffusion and spillover effects, internationally and globally. The nexus between paramilitaries and organised crime represents an urgent development and security challenge that contemporary responses fail to adequately address.

In this paper, we present a set of detailed case studies exploring coercive brokerage in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar that seek to address the above research questions. They draw upon data and analysis generated by a four-year Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) project, Drugs & (Dis)order (<https://drugs-disorder.soas.ac.uk>), as well as other relevant research. In Afghanistan, the case study focuses on Nangarhar, on the eastern border with Pakistan, and the north-eastern province Badakhshan which borders Tajikistan, Pakistan and China, where in both cases government-backed militias were deployed as anti-Taliban counter-insurgency forces. In Colombia, research focuses on Putumayo, in southern Colombia, on the international border with Peru and Ecuador, where paramilitaries played a similar counter-insurgency role in relation to leftist guerrillas and over time became key players in the legal and illegal economies. In Myanmar, we present case studies from northern Shan State close to the China border, and Karen State bordering Thailand, where army-backed militias were an important counter-insurgency force, whilst providing security for businesses in contested, resource-rich borderlands, as well as carving out a role in the country's booming heroin and methamphetamine trade.

The case studies reveal how paramilitaries' relationship with illicit economies can take many forms, including opportunistic predation, systematic taxation, protection rackets, joint ventures with local and transnational investors, and mafia-type set-ups in which they take over a particular market within their area of control.

The cases also reveal significant differences in the level and scope of paramilitary engagement in organised crime. For example, in Afghanistan, engagement tends to be at a low level, mostly focused on cross-border smuggling and controlling regional trade. On the other hand, in Colombia, paramilitaries operate at a higher level in the commodity chain and within the political system.

In some cases, paramilitaries become involved in illicit activities because of limited state oversight and because they are able to act autonomously. However, in most cases the relationship with state authorities is central to paramilitaries' involvement in crime. Connections to the state invariably provide protection, impunity and privileges, which can enable paramilitaries to gain access to, or take over, criminal enterprises, as they become more attractive to investors, compared with other competitors such as rebel groups.

The case studies demonstrate the need to eschew simplistic assumptions about politics and criminality as being automatically separate and opposed spheres of activity. The boundary between them is fuzzy, contingent, deeply contextualised and constantly changing across time and space. Of course, not all paramilitaries have an interest in politics. However, for some, engagement in illicit activities can provide a resource base to pursue wider political agendas. This is especially apparent in contexts where the

means of violence (and thereby having the revenue to purchase weapons and retain troops) is necessary for their political agendas to be taken seriously.

There is a need to rethink simplistic characterisations of paramilitaries as spoilers or self-serving actors, motivated by self-enrichment and predation. This is not to argue that all paramilitaries are political actors who seek to enrol public support and have a worked out political programme. However, the case studies show that a public authority lens helps nuance understanding of the trajectories and motivation of these organisations.

1. Introduction

This research paper examines the nexus between paramilitaries, illicit economies and organised crime in frontier regions, through detailed case study analysis of these phenomena in the borderlands of Afghanistan, Myanmar and Colombia.

In Afghanistan, government-backed militias were deployed as anti-Taliban counter-insurgency forces in peripheral regions (Dirkx, 2017; Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014). In the frontiers of Colombia, paramilitaries played a similar role in relation to leftist guerrillas and over time became key players in the legal and illegal economies, with some eventually moving into formal politics at the national level (Grajales, 2011, 2013; Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2022). In Myanmar, army-backed militias were an important counter-insurgency force, whilst providing security for businesses in contested, resource-rich borderlands, as well as carving out a role in the country's booming heroin and methamphetamine trade (Buchanan, 2016; Meehan, 2015; Meehan & Dan, 2023; Woods, 2019).

By focusing on the connections and entanglements between paramilitaries, hybrid security regimes, illicit economies and organised crime in conflict-affected borderlands and frontier regions, we challenge two dominant policy narratives around paramilitaries. First, the idea that these organisations are symptomatic of state breakdown and they flourish in marginal spaces suffering from 'governance deficits'. Second, the idea that paramilitaries can primarily be understood as apolitical, predatory and self-enriching actors, driven by economic motives, and operating outside formal political systems.

In critiquing these narratives, we advance an alternative approach that seeks to understand how paramilitaries become embedded in enduring systems of rule in borderlands, shaped by protracted conflict and illicit economies. In such contexts, paramilitaries often become pivotal players as violent intermediaries or 'coercive brokers' (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2019, p. 16), whose identity and roles are defined by their positionality in occupying key synapses, or points of friction, connecting the international, national and local levels; the centre and periphery; state and society. This analytical lens provides an entry point for exploring how violence and organised crime become embedded in the functioning of states and markets in contested borderlands, rather than simply being indicative of state failure and underdevelopment in these regions.

The case studies presented in this paper draw upon new data and analysis generated by a four-year Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) project, Drugs & (Dis)order (<https://drugs-disorder.soas.ac.uk/>). This involved longitudinal, mixed methods research in nine drugs- and conflict-affected borderlands, where paramilitaries have become embedded within the political, military and economic landscape.

The case studies address the following research questions:

- 1 What is the relationship between coercive brokers, public authority and frontier governance?
- 2 How, and with what effects, do paramilitaries become involved with illicit economies and organised crime?
- 3 What is the relationship between paramilitaries, organised crime and politics?

The paper is divided into three sections. Section 2 provides key definitions and outlines the rationale for the case study selection, and the methods and data that underpin the paper. Section 3 provides case studies of paramilitaries in the borderlands of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar. Section 4 develops comparative analysis from across these three cases to explore how coercive brokerage can offer important insights into the varying ways in which paramilitaries shape the nature of public authority and how the state functions, illicit economies, and the crime-politics nexus.

2. Definitions and methods

2.1. Definitions

Definitions of militia/paramilitaries vary, often quite radically, and the terms used for these organisations vary across different contexts. For example, in Colombia ‘paramilitary’ is the dominant nomenclature; in Myanmar and Afghanistan the term ‘militia’ is most commonly used to describe similar phenomena. Box 1 sets out the definition of paramilitaries for this study.

Box 1: Paramilitaries

This paper defines paramilitaries as armed groups that are separate from, but connected to, the official armed forces or police. Paramilitaries can take on different forms and they vary in terms of their size, level of organisation, longevity, and objectives. But they share three common features:

- (1) The capacity to deploy ‘big’ violence – this distinguishes them from other armed groups that lack the capacity to deploy large-scale armed force, such as local vigilante groups or self-defence forces.
- (2) Their ‘irregular’ status, as organisations that function outside the state, whilst being closely linked to, and sometimes reliant on the state – this distinguishes them from, for example, anti-state rebel groups and movements. But we have chosen not to use the term pro-government militias, as this misses the frequent ambiguity in government-paramilitary relationships, over time and across contexts.
- (3) Their role as armed political organisations; although political orientations and agendas vary, all the groups in this study have adopted – if not consistently – an anti-insurgent position. This political role – even if neither consistent, coherent, nor explicitly stated – differentiates paramilitaries from criminal groups such as drug cartels and organised crime. As explored below, the boundaries between ‘political’ and ‘criminal’ organisations are fuzzy and fluid, often characterised by a great deal of overlap and hybridity; yet keeping this distinction in mind is important.

Box 2 provides our definition of coercive brokers. This concept is explored in greater depth in the first paper of this series, entitled *Coercive Brokerage: A Framework for Analysing the Paramilitary-Organised Crime Nexus in Borderlands and Frontiers*, which can be accessed here. (<https://www.socace-research.org.uk/publications/socace-rp26-coercive-brokerage-wp1>)

Box 2: Paramilitaries as coercive brokers

Coercive brokers are militia organisations and groups that operate in borderland and frontier regions, and whose identity and roles are defined by their positionality in occupying key synapses, or points of friction, connecting the international, national and local levels; the centre and periphery; state and society. Coercive brokers are network specialists capable of operating in contexts of volatility and instability. They are not anti-state, which differentiates them from warlords or rebel groups, but there is ambiguity about their relationship to the state since they derive power from mediating the state's influence, rather than acting as state proxies.

They occupy a key structural position in frontier and borderland environments, which are defined by fragmented sovereignty and institutional hybridity and where violent intermediation is central to systems of rule and regulation. The nature of frontier spaces creates a need for coercive brokers. However, by fulfilling these roles as intermediaries, coercive brokers become embedded in political and market systems in frontier regions and beyond. As such, there is a need to understand coercive brokers as political actors, who deal with collective action problems by cementing alliances and political coalitions that connect political centres with frontier regions. In doing so, they may come to play an increasingly important role in controlling licit and illicit markets. And finally, they are also social actors who can represent the interests, claims and agendas of frontier societies and communities.

2.2. Case study selection

This paper analyses the nexus between paramilitaries, illicit economies and organised crime through comparative case study analysis of borderland and frontier regions in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar.

In all three countries, paramilitaries have a long history although the case studies focus on periods in which paramilitarism became particularly prevalent.

In Afghanistan, analysis focuses on the period from the mid-2000s to the Taliban takeover in 2021. This period saw a proliferation of officially recognised paramilitaries under the Karzai and Ghani governments in response to the intensifying Taliban insurgency. The case study focuses on Nangarhar, on the eastern border with Pakistan, and the north-eastern province Badakhshan which borders Tajikistan, Pakistan and China, where in both cases government-backed militias were deployed as anti-Taliban counter-insurgency forces.

In Colombia, the case study focuses on the peak years of paramilitarism from the mid-1980s through to the paramilitary demobilisation process that was implemented by the Colombia government between 2003 and 2006. Significant paramilitary remobilisation took place after 2006, although this is not a focus of the case study. Research focuses on Putumayo, in southern Colombia, on the international border with Peru and Ecuador, where paramilitaries played a counter-insurgency role in relation to leftist guerrillas and over time became key players in the legal and illegal economies.

In Myanmar, analysis focuses on the period from the early 1990s up to the 2021 military coup. This was a period in which paramilitaries became an increasingly prominent part of the Myanmar Army's efforts to consolidate control over contested borderlands, and

became key players in licit and illicit economies. Research focuses on northern Shan State close to the China border, and Karen State bordering Thailand. In both contexts paramilitaries have been important counter-insurgency forces, whilst providing security for businesses operating in contested areas, and carving out a role in the country's booming heroin and methamphetamine trade.

These cases have been selected because they share common features and demonstrate important differences. All three countries have been affected by prolonged armed conflicts and the states have deployed paramilitaries to counter crime or insurgency, to deter rivals, and to enforce social control in frontier regions. Additionally, these paramilitaries have endured through different political and conflict dynamics – ceasefires, peace accords, democratic openings/transition, rapid economic change, and renewed cycles of large-scale violence. They have exercised significant intermediation connecting international, national and local levels, and have sought to leverage their position as coercive brokers to exert authority over frontier territories and populations, collect taxes, and mediate between local communities and central states. Moreover, across all these regions, paramilitaries have become heavily involved in illegal activities, primarily, but not exclusively, related to the drug trade.

Important differences between these cases provide insights into how the roles and effects of coercive brokers differ across frontier contexts, as explored further in the comparative analysis in Section 4. The three countries have experienced different political regimes and changing 'war cycles' and 'peace cycles'. Myanmar experienced a major political crisis and worsening violence following the February 2021 military coup d'état after a brief attempt at democratic transition. In Afghanistan, 2021 saw the Taliban takeover after the two-decade American invasion. In Colombia, the ambitious 2016 peace agreement with the powerful Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas was followed by a complex reconfiguration of the armed conflict with continued or intensifying instability in borderland areas.

2.3. Methods

The case studies draw upon new data and analysis generated by a four-year Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) project, Drugs & (Dis)order (<https://drugs-disorder.soas.ac.uk/>), which involved longitudinal, mixed methods research in nine drugs- and conflict-affected borderlands across Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar conducted by a consortium of research partners in the three countries. This dataset includes extensive in-depth interviews with people living in areas affected by paramilitaries, as well as ethnographic insights from members of the research team. The GCRF dataset includes interviews with members and former members of paramilitaries, local populations, civil society organisations, local researchers, journalists, and government officials, as well as international policymakers, NGOs, and researchers working on issues on conflict, violence and illegal economies. The case studies also draw upon existing scholarship and media reporting on paramilitaries.

The paper's comparative case study approach aims to address two methodological limitations of existing work on paramilitaries. First, most of the detailed research on paramilitaries focuses on single case studies or countries, with very few providing

qualitative and contextualised comparative insights across cases (Jentzsch et al., 2015). Second, almost all cross-country comparative research on paramilitaries involves using large-scale quantitative analysis that relies on militia datasets, primarily the Pro-Government Militias Database (PGMD) created by Sabine Carey and Neil Mitchell, which contains information on pro-government militias for all countries from 1981 to 2014 (Carey & Mitchell, 2017). However, the findings from such research are often not properly contextualised and the database itself contains large data gaps. For example, for Myanmar, the database records only six 'pro-government militias', despite scholarship on the country reporting many hundreds of active militias, the majority of which fit the database's definition (Buchanan, 2016; Eck, 2015; Meehan, 2015; Meehan & Dan, 2023; SHAN, 2010; Woods, 2019). Furthermore, the data provided on the six militias that are in the database for Myanmar contains many errors. This level of data inaccuracy – when replicated across other countries – raises significant questions about the reliability of quantitative analysis that is generated from this database without proper contextualisation.

Detailed comparative case study analysis provides a way to move beyond these limitations, although this methodology also faces significant challenges. The ambiguity, fluidity and informality surrounding coercive brokerage makes it a challenging phenomenon to study comparatively, as does the fact that meanings and connotations surrounding paramilitaries and brokerage vary across different contexts. Furthermore, gaining reliable and systematic data on this subject remains extremely challenging and raises significant ethical and safety considerations. Paramilitaries seek to ensure their activities – especially their involvement in criminal activities and use of violence – remain secretive. Even where people have insights into paramilitary activities, they can face significant dangers from divulging such information.

Thus, although these case studies address a common set of research questions, they draw upon different methods and sources of data, linked to the backgrounds of the researchers, the particular research challenges associated with each context, and the different data sources available. For example, in Colombia, court documents and judicial rulings as part of the 'Justice and Peace' transitional justice programme surrounding paramilitary demobilisation have provided a rich data source. In Myanmar, the research team were able to draw upon religious and kinship networks to conduct a series of interviews in paramilitary-controlled territories, including with current and former paramilitary members and leaders.

3. Case studies

3.1. Afghanistan

Military clientelism and the emergence of coercive brokers in Afghanistan's borderlands

Jan Koehler

3.1.1. History of militia formation in Afghanistan

Armed groups outside, but linked to, formal state structures have a long history in Afghanistan (Dupree, 1984). Prior to the overthrow of the monarchy in 1973, tribal militias were tolerated, and at times co-opted as local enforcement bodies by the state. This was most pronounced in frontier regions that had emerged as crucial political and economic zones, where state presence tended to be mediated and state effects indirect. These regions, semi-detached from central rule, have, however, been central to both formation and disruption of political settlements that had been shaping Afghanistan's early statehood (Rubin, 2002; Glatzer, 2001).

Against the background of fragmented coercive state power, there have been two subsequent phases of militia formation¹ – both linked to external interventions, the first during the 1980s following the Soviet invasion, and the second following the US-led intervention post-9/11. In both cases, militia groups were mobilised in response to state crises triggered by Islamist insurgencies emerging from the periphery that challenged the foreign-backed central state.

Protracted insurgencies and state-backed militia mobilisation led to the emergence of a distinct class of semi-autonomous political intermediaries, or 'coercive brokers', with a power base at the margins of the state. The evolving relationship between central state elites and those local intermediaries has been critical to Afghan statebuilding efforts. In both periods (following the 1980s Soviet invasion and later following 9/11), the initial role of coercive brokers was largely a defensive one. This included: supporting the regular forces, holding ground that had already been 'cleared'; providing intelligence to foreign and national security forces; and preventing insurgent infiltration in peripheral regions, particularly provincial and district centres. However, the loyalty and efficacy of such groups proved to be ambiguous, as was their role in winning over the population – and ultimately in both periods it was the switching of loyalties of such groups that led to the downfall of the governing regime.

¹ Note that in this case study we use (counter-insurgency) militia, and the specific local denominators of such militia formation by their programmes (for instance, the ALP – Afghan Local Police), as well as the generic Afghan term for community militias (Arbakee) for the same phenomenon. We acknowledge that terminology is contested and empirically, local armed groups are fluid, with their identities and relationships changing over time and across space.

The first phase of militia mobilisation was associated with the efforts of the Najibullah government and its Soviet backers to stem the growing mujaheddin insurgency, particularly in north and central Afghanistan.² When those militias eventually switched sides – after the break-up of the Soviet Union which led to declining external support – the mujaheddin took over the state, resulting in a further fragmentation of the means of violence in the early 1990s, and the formation of a new elite of field commanders and warlords replacing both traditional as well as bureaucratic elites (Giustozzi, 2000; Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014). During the course of the war years, the illicit drug economy grew year-on-year, establishing Afghanistan as the major global source for heroine (Bradford, 2019), and it rose in relevance as a key resource feeding into a transnational war economy (Goodhand, 2008). This also provided an important source of revenue for military fronts and regional strongmen. Therefore, the semi-autonomous coercive brokers turned into regional, and in some cases, national principals with political portfolios – until they were (temporarily) ousted during the first reign of the Taliban over most of Afghanistan.

3.1.2. The post-2001 international intervention and experiments in militia formation

The focus of this paper is on the post-2001 period, a second phase of militia formation in the context of an internationally induced experiment in liberal statebuilding. This was built on the shaky foundations of the Bonn Agreement of December 2001, an exclusive political settlement that brought major leaders of the fragmented politico-military patrimonies of the mujaheddin civil war period back into power (Schetter, 2004).

Initially, US Special Forces relied on local commanders of the fragmented mujaheddin army as auxiliary counter-Taliban and Al Qaida ground forces, as part of the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom. Subsequently, the transitional Afghan government under US guidance disbanded these early militia groups in an effort to build a standing Afghan National Army from scratch, and subjected them to a Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programme (Dennys & Hamilton-Baillie, 2012; Behr, 2012). However, many of the foot soldiers were not absorbed into the official security sector or employment in the licit/formal economy, and ended up working in the illicit economy and/or joining the rapidly emerging private security market. The more senior and well-connected leaders were able to move into civilian careers in politics, the police or the private security sector and/or business (Dennys & Hamilton-Baillie, 2012). They came to dominate elected positions in parliament and provincial councils – turning into political patrons for their local constituencies, often retaining a coercive edge by keeping a degree of control over local armed groups via their lower-level leaders who provided the key link into the peripheries for the emerging Kabul political elite.

Mirroring the 1980s, armed intermediaries established themselves as coercive brokers, linking up to state-provided resources and political protection via the former warlords, now invested in political careers in Kabul. The illicit economy, particularly cross-border smuggling, generated the rents to sustain networks of military clientelism. Hence, the

² Most importantly, the Uzbek Jawan militia of Abdul Rashid Dostum and the Hazara Shia/Ismaili Baghlan militia of Sayed Mansur Naderi.

post-Bonn political economy was based on a narrow and volatile political settlement in which the Kabul government attempted to maintain a level of order by distributing rents and privileges, among political elites at the centre and armed power brokers in the periphery.

In the context of a growing Taliban insurgency after 2007, the international military footprint expanded and intensified, taking the form of more foreign troops on the ground, more resources focused on building and training the Afghan military and police force, and at the same time supporting the (re)emergence of militia forces (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2011; Ruttig, 2009). The main push came with the US-initiated surge of foreign forces from 2009, following a highly critical assessment of the prospect of subduing the Taliban insurgency by the newly appointed International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commander (McChrystal, 2009). A wider community militia programme, modelled on the Sons of Iraq programme and the (Sunni) Awakening movement, was part of the US-pushed plan to regain the initiative against the insurgency (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; Phillips, 2009; personal conversation with Stanley McChrystal Berlin, April 2010). While part of the political establishment in Kabul – mostly former commanders of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance of 1990 – welcomed this move, leading politicians including President Karzai, were highly sceptical and pointed to Afghanistan's bad historical experiences with informal armed groups and the proliferation of local commanders (De Lauri & Suhrke, 2021; interview with presidential adviser and former Minister of the Interior, Hanif Atmar, October 2013).

After an initial period of chaotic ad hoc militia creation (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; Lefèvre, 2010; Baczko, 2016; Koehler & Gosztanyi, 2014),³ more formal militia programmes, linked to specific ministries, were introduced from 2010. The most important nationwide programme was the Afghan Local Police (ALP) that came under the Ministry of Interior.

Following the 'surge', a phased international military drawdown was completed by the end of 2014. In parallel, the Taliban steadily increased its control of the countryside, whilst the Kabul government attempted to hold onto territory, particularly provincial centres, drawing on a combination of its regular and militia forces. These efforts were undermined by political infighting within the National Unity government led by President Ashraf Ghani (a Pashtun from eastern Afghanistan) and Abdullah Abdullah, a representative of the non-Pashtun successors of the Northern Alliance in the newly created position of Chief Executive (Clark et al., 2020; Dearing, 2019; Feda et al., 2018). After winning a second term in 2020, the Ghani government intensified the push to integrate militias into official command structures and the budgets of different branches of the formal Afghan National Security Forces, in an attempt to weaken the control of political patrons and regional strongmen. This policy focused on pushing those strongmen out of the official positions and cutting them off from access to revenues, often in the form of rents from informal trade in both licit and illicit commodities (see cases below for examples).

³ Usually referred to as *arbakee*, this is an eastern Afghan denomination, traditionally for only temporary militias under the control of tribal councils since 2009. However, 'arbakee' is used across Afghanistan, including in non-tribal regions of the north, as a generic term for local militias.

Arguably, this eventual push against political patronage, regional strongmen and coercive brokers led to the unravelling of the post-Bonn political settlement that had underpinned the Islamic Republic. Regional strongmen and their local proxies were unwilling to fight on behalf of a central government whose intentions they increasingly mistrusted and which could no longer afford to buy their loyalty because of declining international resource flows.

We focus on the dynamics of militia formation and coercive brokerage in two border provinces of Afghanistan, both with distinct political economies shaped by illicit trade, proximity to international borders and protracted conflict, leading to particular ecologies of coercive brokerage.

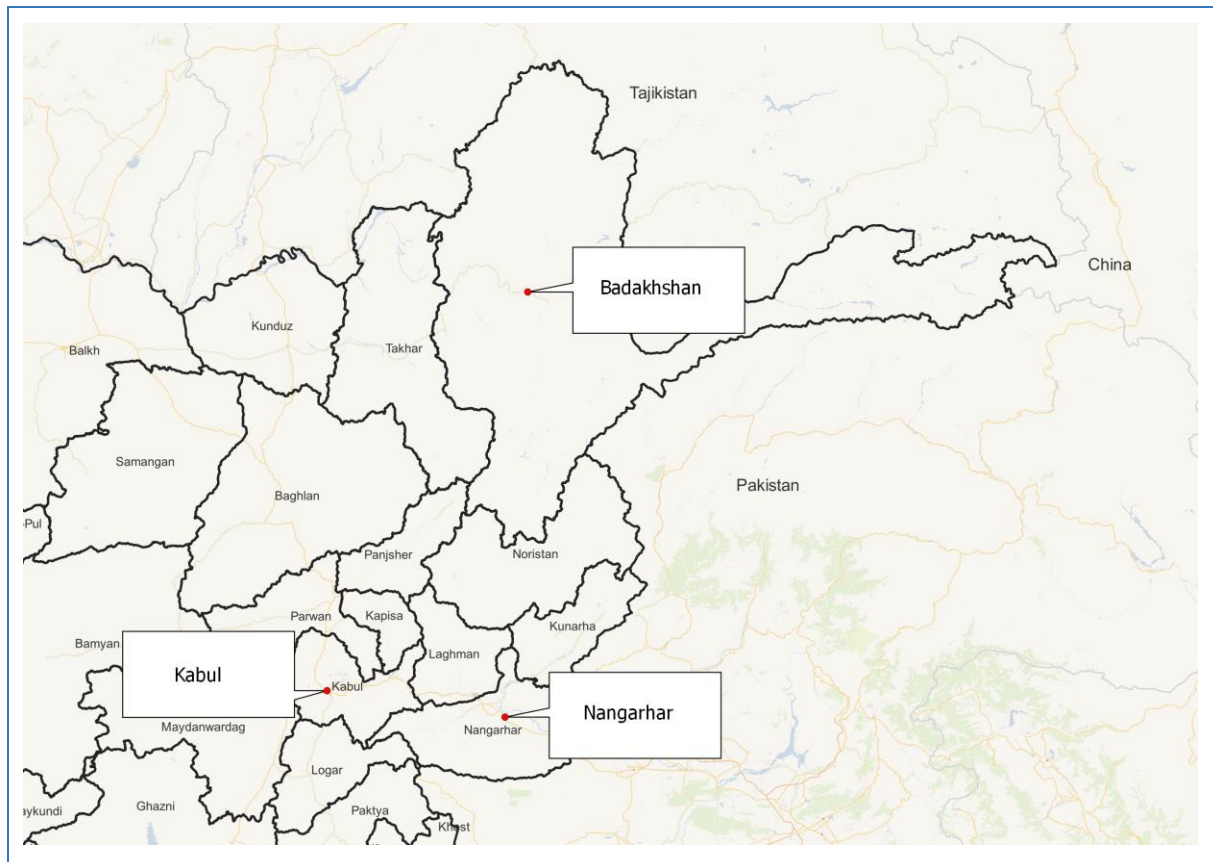
3.1.3. Militias and coercive brokerage in two border regions: Badakhshan and Nangarhar

The symbiosis between militias and illicit economies is particularly pronounced in frontier areas. Here, drug production and smuggling evolved as a major feature of the local political economy, whilst internationally supported counter-insurgency efforts turned these regions into centres of militia formation. This constellation of factors created a permissive environment for local strongmen with established enforcement capacities to engage in coercive brokerage, negotiating the interaction between central state actors and local elites and their respective constituencies.

We focus on two borderlands: first, the remote north-eastern province of Badakhshan, bordering Tajikistan, Pakistan and China. Badakhshan has long been a centre and retreat of the mostly Tajik mujaheddin party Jamiat and the Jamiat-dominated Northern Alliance, which resisted a Taliban takeover of the province in the 1990s (Münch, 2013). The second borderland is Nangarhar, a politically and economically well-connected province, home to one of Afghanistan's most important international border crossings into the tribal areas of Pakistan at Torkham (Koehler et al., 2021). Nangarhar, with its vibrant provincial capital Jalalabad, is at the centre of the Pashtun-dominated Eastern Provinces of Afghanistan.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify how the analytical concept of coercive brokerage applies in Afghanistan and the relationship between militias and the state. Over more than four decades of conflict, militia groups have morphed in form and function between more or less government-associated militias, jihadist insurgents, traditional local enforcement bodies, and local armed men defending their 'fiefs' against interference from the state, as well as insurgent claimants to alternative state authority. This has been taking place under conditions of at times very direct external military interventions and occupations. Hence, as shown below, coercive brokerage is a precarious function performed by individuals who need to adapt to the constantly changing conflict environment – the same group may change colours from bodyguards of a Member of Parliament to an informal community militia, enrol in an official state-financed paramilitary programme, and operate as an 'illegal' mujaheddin group engaged in smuggling, depending on circumstance.

Figure 1: QGIS map by author showing Badakhshan and Nangarhar in relation to the national capital Kabul



3.1.4. Militias in Badakhshan: coercive brokerage in a marginal periphery

In Badakhshan, with its substantial geographic and political distance from the national centre, ‘homegrown’ militias are deeply rooted in the violent orders of the past – that is to say, communist rule, mujaheddin resistance, and the anti-Taliban fight of the Northern Alliance. This resulted in a jihadi commander structure with associated *tanzeem* (politico-military mujaheddin parties) affiliations and powerful political patrons in Kabul. The local militias had an ambivalent relationship to the Islamic Republic at its different levels (local, provincial, national), and secured – sometimes forcefully – a degree of autonomy from the state while pressing for positions within it.

Coercive brokerage has been a key feature in relations between the province and the central state as well as between different communities within the province. The rule of Northern Alliance commanders shaped the rules of the game that structured relations between the province and the centre. The strong position of former jihadi commanders and their networks was aided by the remoteness of the province, access to extractable or taxable resources beyond the control of the state and strong support from former warlords-turned-political patrons in Kabul. As local elites with coercive potential, connected to the formal security forces in the province (the army, police, border police and National Directorate of Security (NDS) (secret service)), enjoying political protection from former warlords-turned-politicians, they remained dominant players in both the licit (construction, transport), semi-licit (gemstones, cigarettes) and illicit (drugs, weapons) economies.

A key political fault line, structuring the political economy within Badakhshan, has been the internal competition between two dominant (mostly Tajik) Jamiat factions: first, the network of jihadi commanders affiliated with the former mujaheddin president Burhanuddin Rabbani, himself a native of Badakhshan province; second, the Panjshiri faction dominated by Mohamad Fahim as successor of the assassinated Ahmed Shah Massoud. Other fronts of considerable influence had a more local, district-specific focus.⁴ All of them had been central figures in the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance of the 1990s.

Post-2001, a number of powerful Jamiat commanders demobilised, seeking a civilian career in politics or business.⁵ Others retained their coercive power and defended their autonomy from the state and financed their armed men by engaging with the illicit economy, subsequently reinvesting profits in land and businesses. They also leveraged access to administrative positions in the province.

One example is Nazir Mohammad, who first convinced the German Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Faizabad to enrol his armed men to guarantee perimeter security of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) camp – having been a source of much of this insecurity, including occasional rocket fire directed at the camp. Having progressed from renegade jihadi commander to official security provider to the foreign forces, Nazir Mohammad continued his political career to become mayor of Faizabad City. Throughout, he maintained his sizeable militia. Despite occasional violent infighting with competing coercive brokers,⁶ Nazir Mohammad was widely credited with using his enforcement capabilities to keep Taliban insurgency at bay and to shape political competition with the Panjshiri faction of Jamiat, and coalition management within Badakhshan.

A second example is commander Qari Wadood, who initially defended his control over a stretch of the northern border used to smuggle opium and heroin into neighbouring Tajikistan. As a well-known drug trafficker on both sides of the border, his relationship with law enforcement remained strained until he finally secured the position of head of police in one of the strategically important districts of Badakhshan (Baharak). There he retained his private force of armed followers (in part enrolled into the official ALP counter-insurgency militias) and oversaw a main hub of informal trade in licit (lapis lazuli) and illicit (drugs) commodities until his eventual arrest in 2016 for drug-related offences.

The latter case shows how attempts to formalise militias into units controlled and financed by the Ministry of Interior (ALP) or the NDS (Popular Uprising Forces) remained superficial and patchy. Many commanders kept their own so-called *arbakee* forces (informal community militias) which sometimes vastly outnumbered the official police and formalised militia forces.

4 Relying on the political patronage of two former warlords with changing political portfolios in Kabul: the Pashtun Abdul Sayyaf and the Uzbek Abdul Rashid Dostum.

5 For example, Sardar Khan, who commanded over 2,000 men at the time of the international intervention ousting the Taliban.

6 Like the Uzbek Hizb-Islami (Hekmatyar) commander Abdul Jabar Mosadiq from neighbouring Argo district, who had a career path similar to that of Nazir Mohammad from renegade commander to district governor.

Changes in the set-up and political significance of militias in Badakhshan were shaped by two related processes that eventually upended the relatively stable provincial-level political settlement. Escalating local tensions between Jamiat factions were related to political competition between Kabul patrons over the allocation of key positions at the provincial and district levels, linked to the mobilisation of votes, and the control of informal rents and taxes. Most significantly, the fragmentation and weakening of militia influence followed the break-up of more hierarchically integrated political patronage linked to the death of the key warlords-turned-politicians, General Fahim, who died in 2014 of natural causes, and Burhanuddin Rabbani, who was assassinated by the Taliban in 2011. The resulting splintering of political support was reinforced by the centralising policies of Ashraf Ghani, designed to place militias under tighter state control and weaken regional patronage networks and the associated influence of coercive brokers.

3.1.5. Militias in Nangarhar: coercive brokerage in a central periphery

Whereas in Badakhshan the state footprint is more distant and indirect, in Nangarhar, the state and international forces are very visible. Over the last two decades there have been several waves of militia experimentation, reflecting a more substantial central state (and US military) presence than in most northern provinces.

Nangarhar has historically played an important role in shaping power relations at the centre, as well as having strong ties across the border with the so-called tribal areas of Pakistan. It has also been one of the centres of activity of the Taliban movement. Hence, both the Kabul government as well as its foreign backers kept a strong focus on Nangarhar. The province has been a focal point for both the US-led counter-insurgency operations as well as the initially UK-led counter narcotics policies (Mansfield, 2016).

Therefore, coercive brokerage in Nangarhar developed along different lines to the Badakhshan case, with militias being less autonomous from the central state. At the same time, the social embedding of local armed groups, while weakening across most districts, relied historically on Pashtun tribal representation rather than the more recent and ethnically shaped jihadi party affiliations that were significant in Badakhshan. These underlying political organisational forms (militant ethnic parties versus tribal fission and fusion within one dominant ethnic group) had rather different implications for militia formation, their control, and the potential for coercive brokerage from their ranks.

For example in Dur Baba district, a comparatively stable tribal militia formation emerged, initiated by a local power broker and district chief involved in cross-border flows of licit and illicit goods (Koehler et al., 2022). For years, this local arrangement kept insurgents out, and state interventions at bay, turning the otherwise resource-poor mountain district into a lucrative hub for smuggling in licit and illicit goods (Goodhand et al., 2021). To achieve this, the power broker invested considerable social and economic capital in maintaining distributive arrangements between the relevant tribal representatives, while placing his sons in political positions at provincial and national levels to shield the district from attempts to place it under more direct state control. However, replicating this system in other districts of Nangarhar proved to be impossible despite his trying to do so over a 16-year career as district governor across the province, and it remained a telling exception in a district unaffected by direct external interference.

In more central districts, US-funded militias operated in areas cleared by Afghan and international forces, primarily along the Jalalabad-Torkham road crossing into Pakistan. Increasingly, these units came under pressure from Taliban advances, particularly following the drawdown of foreign forces by 2014. Prior to the Daesh/ISKP establishment in part of the province in 2014/15, which shocked both government and Taliban, this continuous and often contradictory foreign intervention had a fragmenting effect on state authority, community structures, as well as on the Taliban insurgency in this province (Osman, 2016; Mansfield, 2016). Additionally, competition between central political patrons seeking to gain or secure influence over local elites and associated resources, as well as cross-border meddling and blending with insurgents and militias on the Pakistani side, drove this early fragmentation of local armed groups. Our research revealed how contested and fluctuating command and competition over rents generated at checkpoints prevented the leaders of those formations from providing anything resembling consistent brokerage services. In terms of providing a degree of protection against local and – more importantly – external (Pakistani) Taliban insurgents, they were appreciated by local traders and community members interviewed (Koehler et al., 2022). However, otherwise they were seen as arbitrary forces informally taxing local businesspeople and at times escalating long-standing tribal issues by altering the local balance of power (Osman & Clark, 2017).

However, the Daesh/Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) shock changed this fragmented militia landscape, pushing towards more unified and, eventually, state-controlled militias. An externally financed counter-Daesh militia emerged, organised by one of the regional strongmen (Haji Zahir Qadir of the Arsala clan) in the south-eastern districts bordering Pakistan where Daesh had established itself as a dominant armed group. In parallel, there were several independent local militias under the control of district-level power brokers, and areas where the Taliban held on to power despite Daesh and government pressure (Koehler et al., 2022). Finally, the state managed to take control of most of those different militias, placing them under the umbrella of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) uprising programme and the late creation of an Afghan Territorial Army (ATA) controlled by the Ministry of Defence (Osman & Clark, 2017).

The specific case of ad hoc counter-Daesh militia formation highlights a dynamic that explains why more stable political settlements with coercive brokers as key intermediaries between the state and local elites representing communities failed to emerge in Nangarhar. The counter-Daesh force was initiated by Haji Zaher Qadir from the influential Arsala family, a regional strongman with a history in both the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and national parliament, and financed by the US. The militias were seen as highly effective and were appreciated in their core task of defeating Daesh in Nangarhar. Zaher mobilised them using a network of trusted commanders he had cultivated a relationship with, whilst being commander of the border police in the Northern Sector.⁷ These were people personally loyal to Zaher and no community vetting or involvement in the militia formation was reported. However, after ousting Daesh, these ‘private’ militias were taken over by the NDS, sidelining Zaher and frustrating his political ambitions. Under NDS pressure, the militias fragmented and eventually broke down as

⁷ At that time, he had some 200 fighters from Nangarhar with him as his ‘Praetorian guard’ whom he financed privately (personal conversation in Kunduz, 2009).

top-down creations of one key political broker, with little social embedding. Some commanders continued their involvement in drug smuggling under NDS patronage while those rejecting the switch to NDS control were more likely to be targeted and jailed for their involvement in this criminal economy (Koehler et al., 2022).

The level of top-down state control and direct interference by high profile political figures lacking local social embedding caused a degree of disruption and discontinuity to the local political economy not seen in borderlands with less direct international and central state involvement.

3.1.6. *The relationship between militias and transnational organised crime*

The distinction between organised crime and tolerated, accepted and even state-supported aspects of the informal or illicit economy is blurred in cases like Afghanistan, where state formation is contested, disrupted and at times driven by international interventions.

In most of the cases of the militias observed in both Badakhshan and Nangarhar, their link to the transnational drug economy appeared to be mostly indirect and by proxy. This relates to rents that can be generated within the territory controlled via the taxation of producers and transporters, the arrest or theft of the drugs at checkpoints, as well as the arrest of traffickers and their subsequent release for ransom or bribe payments. In more state-controlled contexts like Nangarhar, most of these activities need to be negotiated and revenues divided with official ANSF in charge (NDS and ANP).

Some of the political patrons of militias and some higher-level militia commanders were known to be involved in larger scale drug trafficking; this, however, was not necessarily related to their relationship with a local militia. While there was clearly a division of labour between militias and the professional drug economy (cultivators, storage, processing, transportation and traders) we also identified cases where militias were directly involved in the drug trade itself, using the official cars to smuggle goods in larger quantities to main border crossings.⁸ When paramilitaries and their commanders enjoyed greater autonomy and succeeded in taking over positions in the ANSF while keeping control over their personal local militias, the relationship to what may be referred to organised crime was more blurry, as the case of Qari Wadooj, chief of police and militia leader in Baharak, Badakhshan, shows (see above), who was eventually arrested for his direct involvement in drug trafficking operations.⁹

⁸ The large militia formation around commander Malik Dekhan in Nazyan district of Nangarhar, set up by Zahir Qadir as counter-Daesh militia and involving some long-standing professional drug traders as sub-commanders is an example.

⁹ The case of the specific political settlement reached with the involvement of a well-connected cross-border broker in Dur Baba, involving the reinvention of tribal militias and rent distribution between relevant tribal leaders, fits even less smoothly into an organised crime perspective. On the one hand the relationship between the apex broker with both official and informal portfolios (as district governor, tribal elder overseeing local militias, and cross-border trader) on the Afghan side and a powerful militia on the Pakistani side (Afridi Peace Committee) was key in establishing the district as a reliable and durable transit hub for drug trafficking bypassing the official border crossing at Khyber. On the other hand, this local equilibrium was supported by the central government and even treated as a showcase of counter-Taliban stability in an otherwise contested environment. The broker was eventually sacked and sidelined by the Kabul government, not for his involvement in criminal activities, but for displaying higher-level political ambitions and using his local standing to organise public protests against Kabul's inaction in response to the one-sided closure of the border by Pakistan (Koehler et al., 2021).

Coercive brokers who established themselves successfully between central political elites and rent extraction from the local illicit economy often reinvested their profits in the licit economy, putting their political protection, official status and coercive resources to best use and starting to dominate relevant local markets.

3.1.7. Pathways into politics: militias' relationships with the state

The ability of local leaders to organise and control violence, challenging or supporting the state, has been a defining characteristic of Afghan state formation. Governance has always been mediated through local power brokers, whose power base and autonomy have varied across space and time. Whilst mediated statehood has been a point of continuity, the dynamics of brokerage have changed, in response to shifting political settlements and conflict dynamics. Paramilitaries first emerged during the 1980s Soviet wars in response to the increasingly powerful Mujahideen fronts operating in the countryside.

While some ways of structuring the interaction between local elites capable of organising violence remained constant, other aspects changed significantly. Three interlinked features of this relationship can be highlighted. In combination, they shape the relationship between those local coercive capacities in the periphery and a central state challenged by an insurgency that is competing for control over those coercive capacities.

1. Security tasks, official programmes

The relationship between militias and the post-2001 state has been driven by the intensifying insurgency. From 2007 onwards, militia programmes set up and financed via the central government and supported by the foreign interveners mattered. They had an impact on the local, more home-grown and historically evolved systems of rule in which militias had played a more autonomous role, sometimes as coercive brokers, sometimes just as arbitrary and oppressive local strongmen. As we have highlighted, in Badakhshan and Nangarhar, the degrees of autonomy and direct state involvement varied across the country, leading to different modes of paramilitarisation.

Militias can be more or less controlled by state authority; they can also be more or less socially embedded. More state control and a stronger social embedding does not, however, necessarily imply less violence or more effective performance in terms of protecting communities from insurgents. The Nangarhar case in particular shows that a private militia set up by a regional strongman can be effective in defeating a powerful insurgency (in this case, Daesh) but falls apart when the state tries to integrate them into an official programme. Informal tribal militias with strong social embedding and autonomy from the state produced good results in Dur Baba for a sustained period. And militias under the control of a powerful police chief – as in the case of Baharak, Badakhshan – may turn out to be more of a private army than a pro-government militia.

2. Seeking political patronage

Paramilitaries do not evolve automatically in the absence of a state monopoly of violence. Despite a Taliban presence, militias did not emerge in all provinces of

Afghanistan; Nimruz is a case in point. As we have argued, paramilitaries are often the result of specific government programmes, sometimes financed and pushed by foreign interveners, fighting a growing insurgency. However, the sustainability of these militias forces depends to a large extent on the system of political patronage linking local militias to state patronage structures, and how embedded they are in local society. In such cases, there emerges a symbiotic relationship between political patrons and coercive brokers who play a role in keeping rivals out and securing control over territory and people. This control is particularly in demand at times of elections, or to protect against central state attempts to sideline the patron. Depending on geography, securing rents from major smuggling and trafficking routes is a further function local militias can fulfil.

3. State resources sought by militias and militia resources sought by the state

This leads us to a third pathway that links local militias to the state and serves as a pathway into politics – material and immaterial resources the state offers and militias seek, as well as the reverse relationship when state representatives seek to benefit from resources controlled by local militias. The cases show that among the most important resources militias may seek from the state is their change of status from an informal armed group to a recognised militia. This implies official benefits like salaries, access to weapons and vehicles, as well as informal political protection and access to political patronage. Also, it may include official positions in the ANSF and the government administration. Although coercive brokers sought formal status because it brought a range of benefits this could also be in tension with their desire to maintain informal control over the armed groups within their domain. Balancing these two imperatives appeared to be easier in areas where state penetration was more limited; for example, in Badakhshan the coercive brokers mentioned retained their armed men despite state pressure, whilst in contrast, in Nangarhar, the powerful militia of Zahir Qadir was ultimately dismantled by the state).

Counterinsurgency-related security aside, resources sought by state actors that may be under the control of local militias are usually less explicitly marked and not part of officially announced policies. There are, however, some obvious hints that follow from the cases introduced here. The first is control over strategically important territory and associated resource flows that the state cannot well control via its official security forces. In the borderlands discussed here, this mostly relates to control over informal border crossings and choke points leading to the border that are used for smuggling licit and illicit goods that state actors want to tap into. Here, smuggling via the border with Pakistan in Nangarhar appears to be more relevant than the border between Badakhshan and rather remote areas of Tajikistan, Pakistan and China.

The second resource local militias provide to central state-level politicians, particularly parliamentarians hailing from the militia's area, is proxy control over constituents and, if relevant, material resources extracted, produced or traded in that area (one non-drug-related example from the cases are the lapis mines in Badakhshan). There is an established pattern in Afghan politics of central-level politicians using their ability to instigate, manipulate and control local conflicts in order to secure a foothold into specific geographies of interest; having access to loyal armed groups in those places is a critical asset.

3.1.8. Conclusion

Afghan militias are a diverse phenomenon that have at times both helped and hindered processes of state formation and counter-insurgency campaigns. The case studies show that in recent Afghan history, militias have played a role in extending the reach of the state in outlying borderland regions, but setting up and deploying militias also comes with serious drawbacks. While we note a wide variety of militia groups in form, function and performance there are some general conclusions that can be drawn from the Afghan case study.

In the Afghan political context, militias (understood here in the narrow sense of state-associated counter-insurgency militias that exist alongside official security bodies) are a fleeting and unstable phenomenon, often driven by more or less official state programmes and their external backers (the Soviet Union in the 1980s and the US-led coalition from 2001 to 2021). Hence, coercive brokerage related to militias is a very fluid and risky business – not many stay in the militia game for very long. However, local armed groups and their leaders have been a politically relevant phenomenon in many parts of Afghanistan. Their affiliation to jihadi parties, insurgents, and state security forces, particularly in northern Afghanistan, has been fluid and their loyalty mostly personalised. At times, they also registered as militias. Hence, coercive brokerage has been a long-standing and important feature of Afghan statecraft but the role of militias, by definition related to a state, has been as fragmented and inconsistent as the ruptured and uneven process of state formation itself.

The relationship between the central state and peripheral elites/coercive brokers has varied according to the ability of peripheral elites in each province to draw on powerful patrons at the centre, the extent to which the frontier region was of crucial political and economic importance to the the state and the level of alignment between the agendas and interests of central state and peripheral actors. These relationships shifted over time – where central state elites attempted to systematically undermine brokerage roles, for example Karzai (in the north-east) during his second term, or Ghani post-2016, this led to a collapse of subnational political settlements, with wider ramifications.

Furthermore, variation in the international military footprint has made a huge difference to the dynamics of militia formation. For example, the role of special forces in Nangarhar and the use of militias to protect NATO forces and infrastructure in Badakhshan both played a role in distorting and unsettling local political settlements and delegitimising the state and its proxies in frontier regions.

The cases indicate that in the context of externally induced or supported statebuilding paramilitaries may be effective in the short term in fulfilling specific security-related tasks, and they may be appreciated by the population for fulfilling these tasks. However, in the long run, militias less autonomous from society than the official security forces, become entangled in pre-existing and often informal ways of doing politics. Sustaining the effectiveness of militias, controlling them and, indeed, dissolving them requires intimate local knowledge, the political will and ability to govern far beyond the liberal paradigm, and is usually a challenge out of reach for most external interveners.

The almost complete demobilisation of militias after the Taliban takeover indicates that forms of political order can be established – notwithstanding questions about the long-term viability, or desirability of this order – even after decades of civil war and fragmented public authority, a vision that liberal peacebuilding promised but failed to deliver in Afghanistan.

3.2. Colombia

Coercive brokerage in Putumayo, Colombia and its limits (1987-2006)

Camilo Acero

3.2.1. Introduction

By 2007, when the paramilitaries demobilised in Putumayo, they had nearly 800 men in arms who controlled the social life of several municipalities and regulated the region's main economic activity: the growing and processing of coca. Despite their success in becoming a large military force capable of disputing power with the guerrillas, the paramilitaries in Putumayo hardly fulfilled a connective function between the borderland and the central state. The early paramilitary experience in the late 1980s was not successful in this respect either. In this case study we will show why coercive brokerage and paramilitaries' political activity did not take the same form in Putumayo as in other regions of Colombia.¹⁰ This peculiar trajectory is analytically relevant to discuss the mechanisms that enable (or block) coercive brokerage and to illustrate the limits of the politicisation of paramilitaries in borderlands with illicit economies.

In different regions of Colombia, paramilitaries typically gained control of territories through the use of large-scale means of violence. First, they became intermediaries between 'their' regions and different state agencies at the centre. Second, they opened the door to the political system and linked up with local and national politicians. Third, they broadened their constituencies through the regulation and distribution of resources from legal and illegal economies, and the funnelling of state services and goods (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2019, 2022).

The regions of illicit economies studied by Ballvé (2020) and Gutiérrez-Sanín (2022) illustrate the above. After massacring and displacing hundreds of people and almost completely expelling the guerrillas, the paramilitaries in Urabá (a region in the north-west of the country) embarked on a process of statebuilding from below led by paramilitary leader 'El Alemán' (The German) (Ballvé, 2020, pp. 68–78). To defeat the guerrillas, the paramilitaries relied on the connections and resources of agrarian and narco-elites, and the army. Then, to implement his project and win local support, El Alemán also incorporated his newly formed network of activists, community organisers

¹⁰ There was a great deal of regional variation in the Colombian paramilitary experience. As Gutiérrez-Sanín (2022, 81) explains, the paramilitaries were a 'cloud' of local experiences of private security provision. In this case study we will draw from that regional variation for analytical purposes.

and NGOs that linked peasant demands with civilian bureaucracies and the international donor community. In this way, the paramilitaries were able to build roads, bridges and other basic infrastructure, and attract resources and projects to their territories. To quote a peasant: 'the bloque [paramilitaries unit] made that bridge for us with the state, and we crossed it' (Ballvé, 2020, p. 77). El Alemán's last move was the creation of a political movement that brought together traditional politicians and peasant grassroots leaders (Ballvé, 2020, p. 84).

In the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (a region on the Atlantic coast), it was Hernan Giraldo – a political boss, large landowner and marijuana plantation holder – who articulated the fight against the guerrillas and became the almost exclusive intermediary between the territories under his influence and politicians and state agencies (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2022, pp. 92–94). Giraldo orchestrated the security demands of marijuana producers and other landowners persecuted by the guerrillas and created a protection racket that evolved into a paramilitary unit. Marijuana resources opened the door for Giraldo to a wide network of contacts in regional politics, which facilitated the creation of his own clientelist network. For instance, politicians who wanted to campaign in his territories had to commit in return to meet certain social demands of his community leaders (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2022, p. 94).

Despite being a region with a presence of illicit economies, the paramilitaries in Putumayo were not able to develop coercive brokerage on the same scale as other Colombian regions for three reasons. First, the paramilitaries were unable to expel the guerrillas and their control was always contested. This meant that their bargaining power (controlled territory) vis-à-vis state agencies and politicians was limited to certain (mainly urban) areas. Second, the experiences of social mobilisation and specific institutional designs made paramilitary intermediation between the central state and the region more difficult. Third, certain organisational traits, such as the type of coalitions and leadership, also complicated the politicisation of the paramilitaries.

3.2.2. Contextual overview of Putumayo

Putumayo is an Amazonian region located in southern Colombia bordering Ecuador and Peru (see Figure 2). Since the end of the 19th century, the region has been more closely linked to the global markets of agricultural and mineral commodities than to the national market. Colombian political elites privileged the interconnection of the Andean regions over the frontiers and other remote regions (González, 2014; González et al., 2002). The lack of roads connecting the frontier region with the centre of the country prevented Putumayo's integration into the national economy.

In the mid-twentieth century, when the oil industry emerged, a local market began to consolidate around the provision of services and food for oil workers (IGAC, 1970). Thousands of Andean peasants migrated to Putumayo, founded villages and expanded the agricultural frontier (Ramírez, 2001). But the extractive industry boom did not last. The demand for workers in the oil companies soon declined and the small local markets were unable to absorb agricultural production (CNMH, 2015). By 1970, Putumayo was the least populated and least developed region of the Amazon (Brucher, 1970, p. 109).

Limited state expansion into this space was not accompanied by the provision of public goods. Despite high oil revenues, the regional governments under the control of the traditional parties (Liberal and Conservative) did not build roads, aqueducts and hospitals at the pace demanded by the growing population (Comisión Andina de Juristas, 1993). Over time, locals formed 'Movimientos Cívicos' (civic movements) to demand that the state and the oil companies build basic infrastructure (Ramírez, 2001). After the decentralisation reforms, civic movements evolved into political movements in opposition to the traditional parties that contested and won elections for mayors and municipal councillors. These movements later became the basis of the territorial opposition to the war on drugs and one of the targets of the paramilitaries (Ramírez, 2001).

In the context of the agricultural and oil crises, rural populations increasingly turned to coca production. Following the interdiction campaigns carried out in Peru and Bolivia in the late 1970s, Colombian drug cartels financed the establishment of coca crops in the Colombian jungles to evade anti-drug prosecution (Gootenberg, 2008). Cultivation expanded rapidly and by the end of the 1990s, the region was already one of the largest coca producers in the country (CNMH, 2015).

After the emergence of coca, several guerrilla groups arrived in Putumayo, but only the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) rebels persisted. In this region, as in others, the guerrillas had a fluctuating relationship with the coca economy (Ferro, 2002), which oscillated between taxing drug traffickers and directly intervening in the trade (Gutiérrez D. & Thomson, 2020; Jansson, 2006).

As a hub of the coca economy and guerrillas, Putumayo has been at the centre of both the counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics wars. The region was the epicentre of Plan Colombia, one of the largest counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics programmes financed by the US (Tate, 2015). The Plan included the financing of aerial coca fumigation campaigns, so-called alternative development programmes and technical and logistical support for state security forces (Acero & Machuca, 2021). The two paramilitary experiences to which we now turn were embedded in this context.

Figure 2: Location of Putumayo



3.2.3. *History of paramilitaries in Putumayo*

The history of the paramilitaries in Putumayo is divided into two stages. The first was between 1987 and 1991, when drug trafficker Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha and other drug traffickers – or ‘narcos’ – formed a protection racket to hit the guerrillas and protect their businesses. The second stage began in 1997 with the arrival in Putumayo of a paramilitary unit sent by Carlos Castaño, the commander of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC),¹¹ and lasted until 2006 when that group demobilised.¹²

After the transformation of the region into a coca-growing hub, narcos formed different private security groups, known as ‘Los Combos’ (the gangs), to protect their laboratories and shipments from thieves and other narcos (Interview 1; Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2018). By this time the FARC had already settled in Putumayo but had co-existence agreements with the narcos. The guerrillas offered reinforced protection to the airstrips in exchange for a monthly tax (Comisión Andina de Juristas, 1993, p. 69).

In 1987, Rodríguez Gacha, who was fleeing from anti-narcotics operations, settled in Putumayo with the blessing of the FARC (Comisión Andina de Juristas, 1993, p. 76). The powerful narco brought with him a group of well-armed and trained gunmen – ‘Los Masetos’¹³ – who quickly co-opted and eliminated many of Los Combos (Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2018, pp. 3945–3947). But the collaboration between the guerrillas and Rodríguez Gacha did not last long and eventually they clashed. In their struggle with the FARC, Los Masetos persecuted the left-wing political opposition and attacked the civic movements (Comisión de Superación de la Violencia, 1992). The new counter-insurgent identity brought Los Masetos closer to the state security agencies (Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2018, p. 3950). This is how Rodríguez Gacha's group evolved into a proper paramilitary group.

Notwithstanding the backing of the police and army, Los Masetos were unable to resist FARC attacks and ended up moving to urban areas of Putumayo. The paramilitaries continued to operate until pressure from civic movements and other social sectors on local authorities led to their expulsion from the territory (Comisión de Superación de la Violencia, 1992; Ramírez, 2001).

Years later, the paramilitaries reappeared in Putumayo as a unit – the Bloque Sur Putumayo (BSP) – linked to the national self-defence project under the command of ‘Rafa Putumayo’, a paramilitary with no previous ties to the region (Verdad Abierta, 2009). In the mid-1990s, the FARC expelled several drug traffickers and middlemen from the region. In response, these narcos asked Carlos Castaño as commander of the AUC for protection (Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2018, p. 3956).

11 For more details, see Grajales (2017) and Gutiérrez-Sanín (2019).

12 Here we follow Gutiérrez-Sanín (2019) who situates the paramilitary phenomenon in Colombia between 1982 and 2007. After the demobilisation of the paramilitaries, other armed groups appeared in Putumayo. There is still no consensus among scholars regarding the nature of the successors to paramilitarism, so we omit this more recent period.

13 Rodríguez Gacha had formed the group Death to Kidnappers (MAS by its acronym in Spanish) in the 1980s along with other members of the Medellín Cartel. Los Masetos refers to the members of MAS.

Paramilitaries were sent by the AUC leadership to Putumayo with the explicit objectives of overthrowing the 'parallel government' set up by the FARC, controlling drug trafficking and attacking the civic movement and peasant organisations that had elected their leaders in local governments (CNMH, 2012, p. 48). Upon their arrival, the paramilitaries taxed narcos and middlemen in exchange for protection (Jansson, 2006) while offering a cheaper price than the FARC (United States Embassy Colombia, 1999).

Besides the financial and logistical support provided to the narcos,¹⁴ the paramilitaries had the assistance of the army and the police (CNMH, 2012; Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2011). The BSP first set up in Putumayo's main urban centre and from there moved to other urban areas where the coca trade was concentrated. But the paramilitaries never managed to defeat the FARC. The rebels took refuge in the more remote rural areas and regularly attacked the paramilitary bases (United States National Military Joint Intelligence Center, 2000; CNMH, 2012; Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2018).

Years before their demobilisation, the paramilitaries changed leadership. In the midst of his attempt to lead a submission of drug-linked paramilitaries to US justice (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2019), paramilitary chief Carlos Castaño pressured Rafa Putumayo to renounce the illicit drug economy (Semana, 2002). The latter refused and opted to link the BSP to a highly narcotised paramilitary unit, the Bolivar Central Bloc (BCB) (Verdad Abierta, 2010) led by 'Macaco', who had been a hitman for Los Masetos a decade earlier (Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2017, p. 56). The change in command entailed the expansion of extortion of merchants and a more direct involvement in the coca economy (Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2018). The paramilitaries displaced some narcos and built their own cocaine processing laboratories (Jansson, 2006).

3.2.4. *The limited scale of coercive brokerage in Putumayo*

As in other regions of Colombia, paramilitaries in Putumayo performed a similar connective function, linking the central state and extending its footprint into outlying frontier regions. Los Masetos' and the BSP's large means of violence and their anti-subversive agenda made them a natural bridge between the protection demands of vulnerable drug traffickers and the security forces. In the 1980s, narcos could not directly receive protection from the security forces because the Colombian state was engaged in an anti-narcotics campaign. But when Rodríguez Gacha announced his anti-communist agenda and began to pursue the guerrillas and their 'allies', the interests of the army and police aligned with those of the narcos. The Masetos served as a channel to coordinate collective action, through the exchange of weapons and information with the police and intelligence agencies (Comisión Andina de Juristas, 1993, p. 192; Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2018, p. 3950). The BSP later scaled up this coordination activity because its ranks included former members of the army who specialised in connecting with different state agencies in large-scale military operations,

¹⁴ The narcos lent their ranches for the paramilitaries to set up operations. In addition, because of their close relationships with coca growers and the population at large, they provided the BSP with information on guerrilla supporters (Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2018).

such as incursions into villages and massacres (Central Intelligence Agency, 1998; Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2018, p. 3925).

The paramilitaries also mediated between the Putumayo population that had historically demanded public services and the regional authorities. Perhaps the most relevant case was the construction of small hospitals and the provision of health services in some urban areas that the BSP controlled. The health service in Putumayo by the end of the 20th century was precarious (Realpe, 1992, p. 28). When the BSP gained control of the urban areas it suffered directly from the failures of the health system because its wounded combatants could not receive medical treatment. To remedy this situation, extend their legitimacy and extract some rents, the paramilitaries built a small hospital that treated the civilian population free of charge with resources from extortion of merchants and public hospitals in the area (CNMH, 2012, p. 259; Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2018). With a combination of coercion and connections, the BSP attempted to hide the operation by creating a fictitious company that guaranteed the flow of medicines to their clinics (Fiscalía General de la Nación, 2013, p. 140; Verdad Abierta, 2012).

Apart from the provision of security, the scale of coercive brokerage in Putumayo was comparatively limited, even in the case of health.¹⁵ The paramilitaries had large means of violence and attempted to expand their domain in the region (United States Joint Forces, 2000), but they were far from being the exclusive intermediaries between the borderland and the central state.

Territorial control was the paramilitaries' bargaining chip to cement alliances upwards with local elites, bureaucracies and politicians and downwards with peasants and other popular sectors (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2022). In Putumayo, the paramilitaries' territorial dominance was patchy. The population and, especially, coca growers were divided: some were in paramilitary-influenced territories and others in guerrilla zones (Interviews 4, 5, 6). Without stable control of their territories, the paramilitaries could not create the intermediary networks that in other regions with illicit economies connected peasants with rural elites, regional and national agencies, and foreign aid programmes. The paramilitaries in Putumayo were an attractive ally for the security forces, not for the civilian bureaucracies.

Paramilitaries were not very successful in organising the population and fostering their own community leadership. The BSP did seek to use pre-existing community organisations and create new ones to mobilise the population, attract projects and obtain social support (Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2018, p. 4009). However, given the presence of the FARC, the paramilitaries remained suspicious that members of these organisations were allies of the guerrillas (CNMH, 2012, p. 133) and, therefore, did not succeed in creating organic links with them.

In addition, FARC territories provided an exit option for social leaders and civic movements persecuted by the paramilitaries (Interviews 7, 8). From there, activists

¹⁵ See Chapter 9 in Gutiérrez-Sanín (2019) for an idea of the magnitude of the takeover of the health system by paramilitaries in other regions.

continued to be representatives of the peasants before regional and national authorities and human rights organisations (Drugs & (dis)order, 2022, p. 42; Mesa Regional de Organizaciones Sociales del Putumayo, 2015, p. 64). Try as they might, the paramilitaries were unable to build a new 'bridge' between the rural population and the central state that could bypass the civic movements.

The paramilitaries had an extra obstacle to building downward coalitions. In the 1990s, nearly a third of Putumayo's population, 135,000 people, worked with coca (United States Embassy Colombia, 1999). This huge social sector had three basic demands of the armed groups: market regulation in exchange for reasonable taxes, better purchase prices, and containment of eradication. Any group seeking to broaden its social base had to respond to some degree to these claims. For a time the FARC responded reasonably well to these demands (Ferro, 2002; Gutiérrez & Thomson, 2020b), although before the entry of the paramilitaries they raised the tax burdens on all participants in the illicit economy, including the growers (CNMH, 2012, p. 42). The paramilitaries took advantage of this situation by announcing upon entering Putumayo that they would not charge taxes (Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2018, p. 3978). But the other demands were difficult for the BSP to process because they clashed with their direct interests and those of their territorial coalition.

Seventy per cent of the BSP's income came from drug trafficking (Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2014, p. 271). Prior to the change in BSP leadership, these resources were earmarked for the payment of combatants and to sustain other organisational costs. Under the leadership of narco commanders, the coca money went mainly to them (Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2018, p. 3999). Increasing the price paid to farmers meant either extracting more resources from narcos – the backbone of the paramilitary coalition in the region – or reducing the income of the unit and its commanders (Jansson, 2006). On the other hand, hindering eradication could have been functional in several ways, but it implied putting the paramilitaries at odds with the security forces. Hence, in areas controlled by the BSP, there were almost no attacks on fumigation planes, as did occur in FARC territories (United States Embassy Colombia, 2000). The paramilitaries preferred to preserve their collaboration with the army and the police rather than respond to the coca growers' demands, and this limited their opportunities to become a credible intermediary between the most relevant social sector in the region and the central state.

3.2.5. Paramilitary politics in Putumayo

The same factors that restricted the paramilitaries' connective capacity – competition with the FARC, organisational features, and the strong tradition of social mobilisation – also limited their ability to establish organic and large-scale links with the political system. It is important to clarify that the paramilitaries, according to their own testimonies, did engage in politics in Putumayo. We will show what that political activity was like, and also what happened with politics in the framework of the political system, that is, participation in elections, support or financing of candidates, and integration into clientelist networks – what in Colombia was known as 'para-política' (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2019).

According to the BSP paramilitaries, politics was to take charge of 'relations with the communities' and, in general, to regulate social life in the territories under their

influence and thus 'obtain the population's approval' (CNMH, 2012, p. 236; Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2018, p. 3997). To govern the territory, the BSP performed several tasks. First, they defined rules of conduct (curfews, closing hours of stores, prohibition of carrying weapons and drug use, and regulation of prostitution), as if they were the mayor of the municipality (Interviews 9, 10, 11; CNMH, 2012, pp. 237-242; Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2014). Second, they administered justice and resolved conflicts related to estate boundaries, debts, violence and adultery (CNMH, 2012, pp. 242-246). Third, they conducted censuses and appraisals of merchants and businesspeople to define the value of the tax to be paid (Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2014, p. 267). Fourth, they organised parties, football tournaments and carnivals to 'cheer up the people' (CNMH, 2012, pp. 268-274). By the nature of their functions, the political cadres became the intermediaries between the population and the paramilitaries.

However, in Putumayo, the governance of paramilitary territory did not go hand in hand with the creation of multiple points of access and contacts with the political system. To be sure, these interactions did exist. For example, some members of Los Masetos were at once police informants, frontmen for narcos, and officials in the mayor's office (Comisión Andina de Juristas, 1993, p. 29). Some contemporary reports state that politicians of the traditional parties used Los Masetos as a cover to remove opponents and left-wing forces from the political competition (Comisión de Superación de la Violencia, 1992). In the case of the BSP, its move into the region was preceded by conversations with political leaders (United States Embassy Colombia, 1999). Furthermore, one of the paramilitaries' financial sources was the taxes imposed on contractors of the regional administrations (Verdad Abierta, 2008; Fiscalía General de la Nación, 2013, p. 139). According to one politician interviewed, the paramilitaries also called the candidates for mayor and laid out the 'rules of the game' (Interview 12), and allegedly financed some of their campaigns (Verdad Abierta, 2008a).

The main point is that the paramilitary networks in Putumayo's political system were comparatively thin. To begin with, there is no record of a pact being made in the region between regional politicians and paramilitaries as there was in 25 of Colombia's 31 departments (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2019, p. 274). Additionally, there have been no judicial sentences on parapolitica in Putumayo (Gaitán, 2010). Moreover, at some critical junctures, politicians aligned with the demands of civic movements and peasant organisations that led to the expulsion of paramilitaries (Cancimance López, 2014; Comisión Andina de Juristas, 1993).

The unsettled dispute with the FARC for territorial control partly explains the relatively limited coordination between paramilitaries and politicians in Putumayo. Politicians were fundamental to the paramilitaries' expansion because they provided protection from state persecution, brokered the provision of goods in paramilitarised municipalities, and gave them access to rents in exchange for access to territory and votes (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2019, p. 254). That interaction depended, of course, on the paramilitaries' control of territory. It was difficult for the BSP to build broad networks within the political system when the guerrillas could sabotage elections, expel elected officials from the region and veto candidates (Pastoral Social, 2006; Ramírez, 2001; Torres, 2011). From the point of view of a political operator, getting involved with the paramilitaries in a disputed region was too risky and the benefits too few (Interview

13), so many opted for 'neutrality'. This was a decision that some paid for with their lives (El Tiempo, 1997, 2000; Pastoral Social, 2006; Ramírez, 2001).

Pressure from below also hindered sustained interaction between paramilitaries and politicians. The case of the mayors' opposition to the paramilitarisation of their municipalities is relevant. In the 1980s, a combination of various social sectors forced the mayors of Putumayo to act against Los Masetos. To exert pressure on the hitherto passive local authorities, the civic movements held demonstrations and spoke directly to judicial officials in Bogotá. Following these actions, the mayors asked the Minister of Defense to intervene over the security forces, and finally the police escorted Los Masetos to the airport to leave Putumayo (Comisión Andina de Juristas, 1993). The action of the social movements was also important when the BSP entered Putumayo. A mayor who was part of the civic movements in one municipality managed to drive out the paramilitaries allied with the army in coordination with the peasant organisations (Interview 14; Cancimance López, 2014). In another municipality, protests by the population over the kidnapping of a merchant led the prosecutor's office to capture ten members of the BSP who had acted with impunity for years (Pastoral Social, 2006, p. 83). The protection from above that the mayors could offer the paramilitaries was weak in the face of popular mobilisation.

Finally, the lack of embeddedness of the paramilitary leadership within local communities impeded this group from opening the door to the political system. Many of the paramilitary units that were most successful in seizing regional political power were commanded by wealthy rural and/or political bosses with long-standing influence in their regions, often without prior military training (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2019; Gutiérrez-Sanín & Vargas, 2017). Indeed, one of the criteria used by Carlos Castaño to select the commanders of the new AUC blocs was to 'find angry influential elites to have an entry point to the region, before and above creating the armed units' (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2019, p. 153).

BSP commanders were not even from the region and could hardly be considered part of the elite. Rafa Putumayo, the leader of the bloc until 2004, was simply a man trusted by Carlos Castaño, and because of his military skills, went through at least three units before settling in Putumayo (Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2014). Daniel, the second in command, worked as a trader in a town in the centre of the country before joining the paramilitaries (Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 2018, p. 3957). Pipa, the political commander, was an agricultural and manual labourer from a nearby region who did not finish school (Verdad Abierta, 2011). Tomate, the financial commander, arrived in Putumayo at the age of 16 as a coca leaf harvester (Verdad Abierta, 2008b). The distance of the paramilitary leadership from regional influential groups made it difficult for the BSP to climb the Putumayo political system's networks beyond their local zones of influence. The paramilitaries needed personnel well positioned in local society to control politics and create their own clientelist networks, something they never had.

3.3. Myanmar

Militias in Myanmar's borderlands: understanding the coercive brokerage-organised crime nexus

Patrick Meehan

3.3.1. Introduction

This case study explores the role that state-sanctioned militias have played in shaping systems of rule in Myanmar's borderlands in the period since the early 1990s up until the 2021 military coup, and how these roles are shaped by their illegal activities and connections to transnational organised crime. Although militias backed by the Myanmar Army have a long history in the country's borderlands, they have become a particularly prevalent force over the past three decades and have played a key role in processes of state formation and the integration of resource-rich frontiers into the global economy, as well as in shaping the everyday lives of borderland populations (Buchanan, 2016, pp. 6-23; Meehan, 2016 pp. 264-275; Myoe, 2009, pp. 29-31). The paper explores these dynamics through analysis of two of the most prominent militias in Myanmar's borderlands. The first of these is the Kawngkha militia, based in northern Shan State close to the Myanmar border, which became a major player in the drug trade before being dismantled by the Myanmar Army in 2020. The second is the Kayin Border Guard Force (Kayin BGF) which governs the Shwe Kokko 'special development zone' on the Thai border. Backed by Chinese investors, Shwe Kokko has grown rapidly since the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar and became a major hub for illegal gambling and cyber scams.

3.3.2. Militias and transnational organised crime in Myanmar's borderlands

Before focusing on the case studies, some background is necessary on Myanmar's borderlands and what 'paramilitaries' refers to in this context, as well as the emergence of criminal networks in the region. Much of the country's borderlands has never been under firm state control. Decades of armed conflict have left a highly fragmented and decentralised political system through most of Myanmar's borderlands (Lintner, 1999; Smith, 1999). Military elites have sought to consolidate control across contested borderland areas through brutal counter-insurgency campaigns and extensive militarisation (Myoe, 2009; Risser et al., 2003; SHRF, 2002). Armed conflict has also been underpinned by localised tensions between non-state armed organisations, shaped by ethnic and ideological divisions, and competition for control over territory, populations, resources, and trade routes. Major cities and roads tend to be under the control of the Myanmar state while armed organisations govern base areas along the country's borders. However, most rural areas remain contested zones subject to overlapping authorities. At the same time, these borderland regions – which connect three of the world's fastest-growing regions in China, India and ASEAN – have become highly coveted economic frontiers. Logging, mining (especially jade, gold, tin, and rare earths), agribusinesses and hydropower dams have generated important commodity flows and vast pools of capital that have driven development across the region (Sadan, 2016; Sarma et al., 2023; TNI, 2013; Woods, 2011).

These regions have also become key hubs for criminal organisations operating across East and Southeast Asia, especially those involved in drug trafficking and illegal gambling (ICG, 2019; Myint Myint Kyu, 2018; Than, 2016; Tower & Clapp, 2020). Long-standing armed conflict and fragmented systems of territorial control and political authority have blunted the capacity of the central state or international organisations to police these regions. Strong synergies have also emerged between the war economy and organised crime. For both the Myanmar Army and armed organisations fighting against the state, there is a perpetual need to generate revenue.

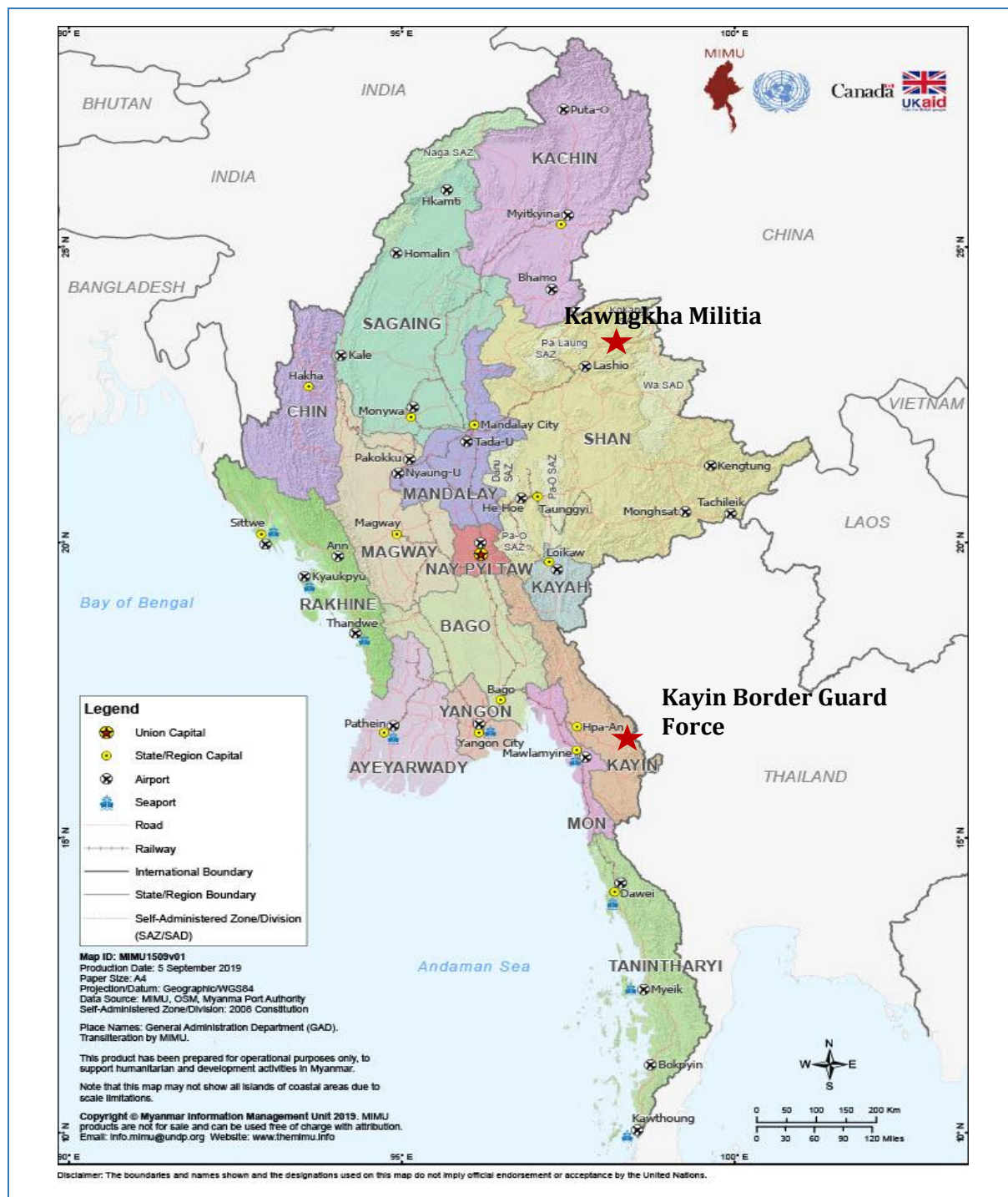
For example, Army units have long been expected to ‘live off the land’ to finance operational costs rather than rely on central command and have a high degree of discretion regarding how they do this (Selth, 2002, p. 136; Callahan, 2007, p. 46). As a result, armed actors on all sides have tolerated – and at times actively protected – criminal organisations operating in their territories in return for payment. These arrangements can be understood, in some cases, as protection rackets, and in others as joint ventures in which armed actors are directly involved in criminal activities. The proximity of Myanmar’s borderlands to vast markets across China, Southeast Asia and India, good cross-border road networks, and crackdowns on organised crime across other parts of the region have further strengthened the attractiveness of Myanmar’s borderlands to criminal organisations.

Local strongmen operating outside larger armed organisations have long been important protagonists in Myanmar’s borderlands (Ahram & King, 2012; Meehan & Dan, 2022; Woods, 2019). These strongmen have sought to carve out enclaves of territorial control and autonomy by establishing militias and offering local populations protection from violence, forced recruitment and extortion by other armed actors. They have often been aided by the Myanmar Army as part of a wider divide and conquer strategy aimed at inflaming local tensions and social conflicts between different armed groups, often along ethnic lines.

In this context, the term ‘militia’ refers to paramilitary-style organisations operating with the consent of the Myanmar Army, and variously known as People’s Militia Forces (PMFs), Border Guard Forces (BGFs), or home guard forces. Although most militias are small, poorly-equipped village defence forces, some, led by local strongmen, are more powerful, having leveraged the Myanmar Army’s militia strategy to establish areas of territorial control (Buchanan, 2016, pp. v–vi, p. 17; Meehan, 2015, p. 273; Meehan, 2016, pp. 270–273; Meehan & Dan, 2022; Woods, 2019). Some have long-standing links to the Myanmar Army, having acted as anti-insurgency militias since the 1980s. Others militia leaders had been members of armed organisations fighting against the government before breaking off to form their own militias, often following factional disputes. These powerful militias command hundreds of well-armed troops with weapons purchased on the black market, govern their own territories and have quite extensive military and administrative structures. They also have significant business empires, encompassing mining and logging concessions, local enterprises (such as gas stations, hotels, haulage companies, and bus companies), cross-border trade, and real estate investments in Myanmar’s major cities (Meehan et al., 2021). Many of these militias have also forged close links with transnational organised criminal organisations – primarily from China – to become key players in the vast illegal economies that emanate from Myanmar’s borderlands, especially drugs, gambling, cyber scams and human trafficking (ICG, 2019;

Tower & Clapp, 2020). The economic opportunities available from resource extraction, border trade and illegal activities has meant that even those militias that control relatively small territories have been able to generate the revenue needed to arm themselves and strengthen their organisations.

Figure 3: The Kawngkha militia (northern Shan State) and the Kayin Border Guard Force (Kayin State)¹⁶



¹⁶ Base Map source: Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU), Map ID: MIMU1509v01

3.3.3. The Kawngkha Militia: The rise and fall of a coercive broker in the China-Myanmar borderland

For many years, the Kawngkha militia was one of the most powerful Army-backed militias in northern Shan State – a highly contested and strategic region that connects central Myanmar to the China border. The Kawngkha militia was formerly part of the 4th Brigade of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the largest armed organisation in northern Myanmar. However, a section of the 4th Brigade defected in 1990 and agreed a ceasefire with the Myanmar Army following the frustrations of the Brigade's battle-hardened commander, Mahtu Naw, at being overlooked for promotion within the KIA in favour of young, better educated but less military-experienced figures (Meehan & Dan, 2022, pp. 16-17).

The organisation was renamed the Kachin Defense Army (KDA) and was granted control over a strategic borderland region that had long been contested by the KIA and straddles the main highway to the China border. The militia was also allowed to retain troops and weapons and was granted the responsibility for the day-to-day governance of the territories under its control. Mahtu Naw was also invited to join the National Convention in 1993, which was responsible for advising the government on drafting the country's new constitution.

Over the next two decades, the KDA grew into a powerful organisation. It established its headquarters at Kawngkha and set up a structure of military units that controlled territory across parts of Kutkai and Lashio townships and strategic crossings over the Salween River (KNG, 2020; Meehan & Dan, 2022). It also established its own formally registered companies and operated extensive business enterprises – both licit and illicit (GCRF Drugs & (Dis)order project interviews, 2019).

The KDA's strength lay in its ability to broker across multiple social and political fault lines. Through its links with the Myanmar Army, it gained protection from attacks by locally more powerful armed groups and acquired various business concessions. At the same time, the KDA maintained close relationships with other non-state actors, primarily the KIA. KDA leaders thus leveraged their brokerage position to strengthen their local power base, territorial control and business networks (GCRF Drugs & (Dis)order project interviews, 2019).

The KDA's ability to administer its own territory, while retaining close links to both the Myanmar Army and the KIA, made it a valuable partner for international drug-trafficking organisations. Since the late 1990s, northern Shan State has been the epicentre of Asia's methamphetamine boom, producing high quality crystal meth that serves markets in neighbouring China, India, Bangladesh and Thailand as well as Australia, Japan and South Korea (ICG, 2019; AFP, 2020; Han et al., 2021). KDA-controlled territory provided a well-protected haven for drug production close to the China border. Many of these drug-trafficking organisations originated from China and some had long-standing networks across the Myanmar-China borderlands dating back to when the Chinese-backed Communist Party of Burma (CPB) had controlled large parts of this borderland, before its collapse in 1989.

The KDA's status as an army-backed militia meant it faced little scrutiny; for example, cars owned by the militia could pass through Army checkpoints without being monitored. Indeed, it is highly likely that drug revenues also reached Myanmar Army officers, which benefited from a system where the KDA took care of business without them needing to become directly involved. At the same time, the KDA's links to the KIA and other armed organisations protected it from attacks and enabled it to establish cross-border trade networks even through KIA-contested areas (Meehan & Dan, 2022).

The KDA's involvement in illegal activities enabled it to accrue significant revenue that it used to purchase weapons, and to oil its relations with the Myanmar Army and the KIA. This revenue base also enabled the KDA to pursue various development programmes and cultural initiatives. It funded the construction of roads, bridges, Kachin language schools, and churches, and also drew in support from the government and NGOs for local development projects. It provided university scholarships for local students and financed major Kachin cultural events at a time when such events were outlawed in government-controlled areas (Meehan & Dan, 2022). The KDA viewed itself as part of a wider Kachin ethno-nationalist political movement to protect Kachin culture and promote local development – and saw this as an agenda that was linked with, but not exclusive to, the KIA.

However, the KDA's position brokering across different fault lines made it vulnerable to shifts in the wider conflict dynamics of northern Shan State. Through the mid-late 2000s, the Myanmar Army made concerted efforts to consolidate control across contested borderlands. In 2009 it demanded that all armed organisations with ceasefires transform into border guard forces (BGFs) and come under firmer military control. In 2011, the ceasefire between the Myanmar Army and the KIA collapsed following the KIA's refusal to accept BGF status, and this was followed by large-scale armed conflict across northern Shan State. The ability of the KDA to broker across state and non-state networks became increasingly constricted as the Myanmar Army made a concerted effort to strengthen its control over northern Shan State. The KDA – like other militias in the region – was pressured to come under greater Army control and was renamed the Kawngkha militia to reflect this. The conflict brought new threats to the militia, not least the prospect that it would be called upon to fight on the frontlines against its Kachin brethren in the KIA. In response, the militia's leaders sought to strengthen their capacity to resist these pressures by recruiting and arming more soldiers and warning that these troops could return to the KIA if pressured to fight against it (Meehan & Dan, 2022). At the same time, the militia still sought to maintain relations with, and provide money to, the Myanmar Army's Northern Command.

Strengthening alliances with drug-trafficking organisations became a key part of the Kawngkha militia's strategy because the drug trade provided the most expedient way to generate revenue quickly. Between 2010 and 2020, Kawngkha militia territory became a centre for drug production. The ties between the militia and Chinese drug-trafficking organisations during this time were part of a conscious strategy to hold onto gains made over the past two decades in an increasingly hostile environment. Of course, these gains included the enrichment of its leaders, but they also related to the stability and modest development of the area under militia control and the protection the militia had provided to local populations against forced recruitment and extortion from other armed groups.

As the conflict worsened in northern Myanmar, the Myanmar Army reassessed its militia strategy. As battlelines hardened, the brokerage roles that militias had played became less important and were even seen as a strategic weakness. The Army was also concerned that the vast revenues being generated from the drug trade in northern Shan State were funding armed organisations fighting against it. In 2020, the Army made the decision to secure direct control over territories controlled by the Kawngkha militia and now used the militia's involvement in the drug trade to justify this move. The Army arrested senior militia leaders, confiscated 1,000 weapons and seized more than US\$200 million worth of drugs, even flying in military attachés and journalists by helicopter to witness the seizures (AFP, 2020; KNG, 2020). Myanmar Army units have since taken over the militia's headquarters. In the years since the raid, the militia's former territories have become heavily contested by various armed organisations, including groups from the Kokang region, which has also been a notorious haven for drug trafficking organisations. Amid this turbulence, local populations have faced continued threats from forced recruitment and taxation by multiple groups.

3.3.4. The Kayin Border Guard Force: coercive brokerage and transnational organised crime on the Myanmar-Thailand border

The nexus between militias, transnational criminal organisations and the Myanmar state has also been a defining feature of the political economy of the Myanmar-Thai borderland. In recent years, this has been captured most clearly by the construction of a series of new border towns along the Myanmar-Thai border. The largest of these is Shwe Kokko, a planned US\$15 billion new city development designed to include an airport, multiple casinos, luxury housing, large hotels and an industrial zone stretching across a 180,000-acre site (Han, 2019). These border towns have become hubs for an array of illicit activities, including online gambling, cyber scams, and human trafficking of people who have been lured to Thailand under the pretence of well-paid tech jobs, only to find themselves forced to work in guarded compounds within Myanmar (Aung Zaw, 2023; Frontier Myanmar, 2022).

At the centre of these developments is the Kayin Border Guard Force (BGF), which controls strategic territories and border crossings along the Thai border and is one of Myanmar's most powerful militias. The Kayin BGF emerged out of the Karen National Union (KNU), the largest ethnic armed organisation in the Thai-Myanmar borderland, which has been fighting against the central Myanmar government since 1949. In 1994, a predominantly Buddhist faction split from the KNU (whose leaders were primarily Christian) and formed the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). The DKBA promptly reached a ceasefire agreement with the Myanmar Army, which provided it with weapons, business opportunities, and protection from KNU attacks. The DKBA was granted control of a strategic swathe of territory along the Thai border that had long been an important cross-border smuggling hub and established its headquarters at the small border village of Shwe Kokko. In return, the DKBA fought alongside the Myanmar Army during its successful assault on the KNU headquarters at Manerplaw in 1995. In subsequent years, the DKBA used the protection it enjoyed as an army-backed militia to establish extensive business activities, encompassing casinos, smuggling (including drugs), taxation of cross-border trade, and mining concessions. The revenue these activities generated enabled the DKBA to expand its coercive power and autonomy. By 2010 it had grown to an estimated 6,000-8,000 soldiers across 13 battalions, armed

with weaponry brought on the black market that exceeded the basic weaponry provided by the Myanmar Army.

In 2010, the DKBA agreed to transform into a 'Border Guard Force' (BGF). The BGF strategy had been launched by the Myanmar Army to bring militias under firmer military oversight and to prevent them from becoming too powerful and autonomous. Sensing the economic opportunities that Myanmar's partial political and economic liberalisation could offer, DKBA leader Saw Chit Thu acceded to this demand and his forces became known as the Kayin BGF (Han, Kean & Weng, 2021).

The BGF justified its actions through narratives of Karen nationalism, claiming that it provided a different path to the KNU to achieve stability and development for Karen communities – especially Buddhist communities – after decades of violence and armed conflict (Han et al., 2021). As Justine Chambers' (2019) nuanced study of Karen State's Buddhist strongmen highlights, Saw Chit Thu was viewed as 'the archetypal strongman...renowned for both violence and corruption', but at the same time 'enjoys a significant degree of "moral authority" as a result of the role he plays in the reproduction of Karen cultural, religious and social life' (pp. 263-264). Saw Chit Thu and other DKBA/BGF commanders positioned themselves as the predominant patrons of religious and civic activities through lavish donations to monasteries and festivals, and by funding roads, schools and health centres. The vast wealth generated through the DKBA's involvement in illicit activities enabled its leaders to position themselves as guardians of Karen cultural identity and Buddhist renewal.

Levels of conflict throughout Karen State declined over the following decade as a result of the 2012 bilateral ceasefire between the KNU and the Myanmar government, and the KNU's decision to sign the nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA) in 2015. Greater stability saw significant investment in the region's infrastructure and a vast expansion in cross-border trade (Dunant, 2019). The Kayin BGF was well placed to capitalise on these developments and positioned itself as a key broker between foreign investors, the Myanmar state and local populations. The BGF's firm control over key border territories and its close links to Myanmar military elites made it a valued local partner for foreign investors (Han, 2019b).

At the same time, the BGF offered a useful foil for Myanmar Army officers, who also sought to profit from these developments but were not meant to be seen as operating large-scale economic enterprises. These dynamics culminated in 2017 with the announcement of a planned US\$15 billion special development zone called Yatai New City to be constructed at Shwe Kokko (Tower & Clapp, 2020). The capital for this project was to be provided by the Hong Kong-registered, Bangkok-based Yatai International Holdings Group, whose main backer, She Zhijiang, has a history of controversial illicit casino businesses in the Philippines and Cambodia (Han, 2019; KPSN, 2020). It remains unclear who the investors behind She Zhijiang are. The driving force behind this initiative appears to have been the clampdown on casinos and online gambling companies in the Philippines and Cambodia following pressures from the Chinese government, as well as concerns over the growing influence on Chinese organised crime in these countries. Myanmar's fragmented and unregulated borderlands represented the latest frontier for these businesses (Tower & Clapp, 2020a).

The Kayin BGF positioned itself as the key broker between shadowy foreign investors and Myanmar's complicated and fragmented political system. The BGF managed relationships with Myanmar military elites and used its own business, Chit Linn Myaing Co Ltd, to provide the necessary domestic front company for Chinese investors. The BGF also secured official approval from the Myanmar Investment Commission for a US\$22.5 million project to build 60 luxury villas at Shwe Kokko (Han, 2019b). This provided a useful front for developers to claim their venture was legal despite construction rapidly expanding beyond the limits of its license. On the ground, BGF troops seized the land required for the project and provided security for the site. Although some compensation was paid to farmers, the figure was set by the BGF below market price and was non-negotiable. At the same time, the BGF also sought to manage relations with the KNU to ensure its business operations were not targeted.

However, the audacity of this project and its connections to transnational organised crime brought new risks for the Kayin BGF. Myanmar's civilian National League for Democracy (NLD) government, which had been elected in 2015, began to pay greater scrutiny to controversial foreign investments and in 2020 launched an investigation into Shwe Kokko (Han et al., 2021). The investigation drew attention to the scale of the Kayin BGF's business activities and proved embarrassing for the Myanmar Army, under whose authority the BGF operated. Seeking to distance itself from the controversy and concerned about the extent of the BGF's growing business empire and dominance over a highly strategic region of the Thai border, the Myanmar Army moved against the BGF. It pressured key BGF leaders to relinquish their business interests or resign and took direct control over several border trade gates operated by the BGF (Tower & Clapp, 2021). In response to these pressures, many BGF soldiers threatened to resign, raising concerns for the Myanmar Army that these well-armed troops might rejoin the KNU or other smaller Karen forces fighting against the Army (Han et al., 2021).

However, the military coup launched against the NLD government in February 2021 marked another shift in relations between the Kayin BGF and state authorities. The coup precipitated an ongoing political crisis in Myanmar and was met with sustained resistance, not only by ethnic armed organisations in the borderlands but also by new armed movements – People's Defence Forces – across the country. In Karen State, the KNU ceasefire collapsed and the KNU became an important linchpin in the fight against the country's new military junta, the State Administration Control (SAC).

Amid this crisis, auxiliary militia forces became increasingly important to the SAC with the regular army stretched across multiple fronts. The Kayin BGF capitalised on this situation. It has seemingly reached agreement with the SAC to regain control over key border crossings and business activities, and to restart the Shwe Kokko project in return for allying with the Myanmar Army. In the years since the coup, BGF-controlled areas along the Thai border have become a major hub of Asia's US\$24 billion online gambling sector and online scamming businesses (Frontier Myanmar, 2022). In August 2022, Yatai Holdings boss She Zhijiang was arrested by Thai authorities on charges of running illegal casinos, but his arrest is unlikely to slow down the development of fortified enclaves along the Thai border. With high-speed internet connections, powered by blockchain and cryptocurrency, protected by well-armed BGF troops, and with the support of the SAC, these enclaves are fast becoming key nodes in the sprawling organised crime and money laundering networks connecting China and Southeast Asia.

3.3.5. Conclusion

The Myanmar case studies highlight four key insights that illuminate the wider findings presented in this paper. First, the capacity to act as ‘coercive brokers’ has been central to the ‘holding power’ of Myanmar’s most influential militias and their leaders.¹⁷ In Myanmar’s borderlands, access to the means of ‘big violence’ is a prerequisite for militia survival and its ability to control and police territory and perform basic governance functions. Coercive brokerage is also founded on a capacity to broker across conflict fault lines and international borders, so as to establish durable political and business networks and alliances. By acting as ‘coercive brokers’ – rather than merely Army proxies – militias have sought to maximise the protection and business opportunities that came from allying with the Myanmar Army, while simultaneously drawing upon long-standing ethnic, kinship and friendship ties to establish alliances that extend beyond the oversight of the Myanmar Army, often with armed organisations fighting against the state. By brokering relations locally between different conflict actors, and with transnational investors, militias have sought to establish autonomy to pursue their own agendas. These agendas have partly been about accumulating power and wealth. They have also often drawn upon ethno-nationalist discourses to position themselves as protectors of local minorities capable of providing security and channelling investment into local areas.

Second, strong synergies have developed between coercive brokerage and illicit activities. Militias that have been able to act as coercive brokers have been highly valued partners for transnational criminal organisations, because these groups can navigate the Myanmar Army’s networks, jurisdictions, regulations and personalities, as well as those of armed opposition movements. This can enable criminal organisations to operate in volatile environments, but without becoming embroiled in armed conflict. It can also enable them to capitalise on the opportunities that come with allying with state-sanctioned groups (state protection, business concessions, access to the country’s banking system). These partnerships also provide some protection from being targeted by opposition forces, with the capability to disrupt their activities. At the same time, the revenue that militias subsequently derive from illicit activities has enabled them to pay for weapons, cover the costs of retaining troops, and establish their own patronage systems, thus further entrenching their position as indispensable coercive brokers.

However, thirdly, the case studies also highlight how links to organised crime entail significant risks for militias. Illegal activities have drawn the attention of powerful neighbours and international organisations whilst also generating local opposition. They have also provided a justification for the state to move against militias at times when they have been unable or unwilling to fulfil the demands of the Myanmar Army, when the Army has sought to rein in their autonomy, or when it has sought to respond to damaging international scrutiny. These tensions explain why the relationships between

¹⁷ ‘Holding power’ can be defined as the capacity to hold out in conflict against other armed organisations – through absorbing costs inflicted by opponents and inflicting costs on others (Khan, 2010). Holding power has many dimensions: revenue; organisational capacity and internal cohesion; coalition-building; the ability to mobilise support and maintain legitimacy (domestically and internationally, for example through ethno-nationalism, service provision (including security) and/or charismatic leadership); access to weapons and recruits; and tactical and fighting prowess.

militias, illegal activities, and the Myanmar state have often been volatile and why the fates of some of Myanmar's most powerful militias have fluctuated so significantly.

Fourth, it is important to recognise that the involvement of Myanmar's militias in illegal activities is part of a broader set of strategies and political goals. These militias see themselves as pursuing distinct political agendas that aim to reshape security arrangements and development at the margins, rather than being solely motivated by profit. Their interactions with transnational organised crime have not led to their depoliticisation, but rather have empowered them to pursue these agendas further. However, it is crucial to understand what 'politics' means in such regions. In Myanmar's highly fragmented and authoritarian political system, pursuing these agendas is less about securing influence at the centre or forging relationships with national-level politicians. The formal national political structures, such as parliament and civilian government departments, even during the NLD government years (2015-20) before the latest military coup, are not the key locus of power in Myanmar. Instead, the scope to pursue political agendas is about mediating relationships locally with the Myanmar Army and non-state armed groups, and establishing connections with foreign investors who can offer access to greater revenue streams than the central government.

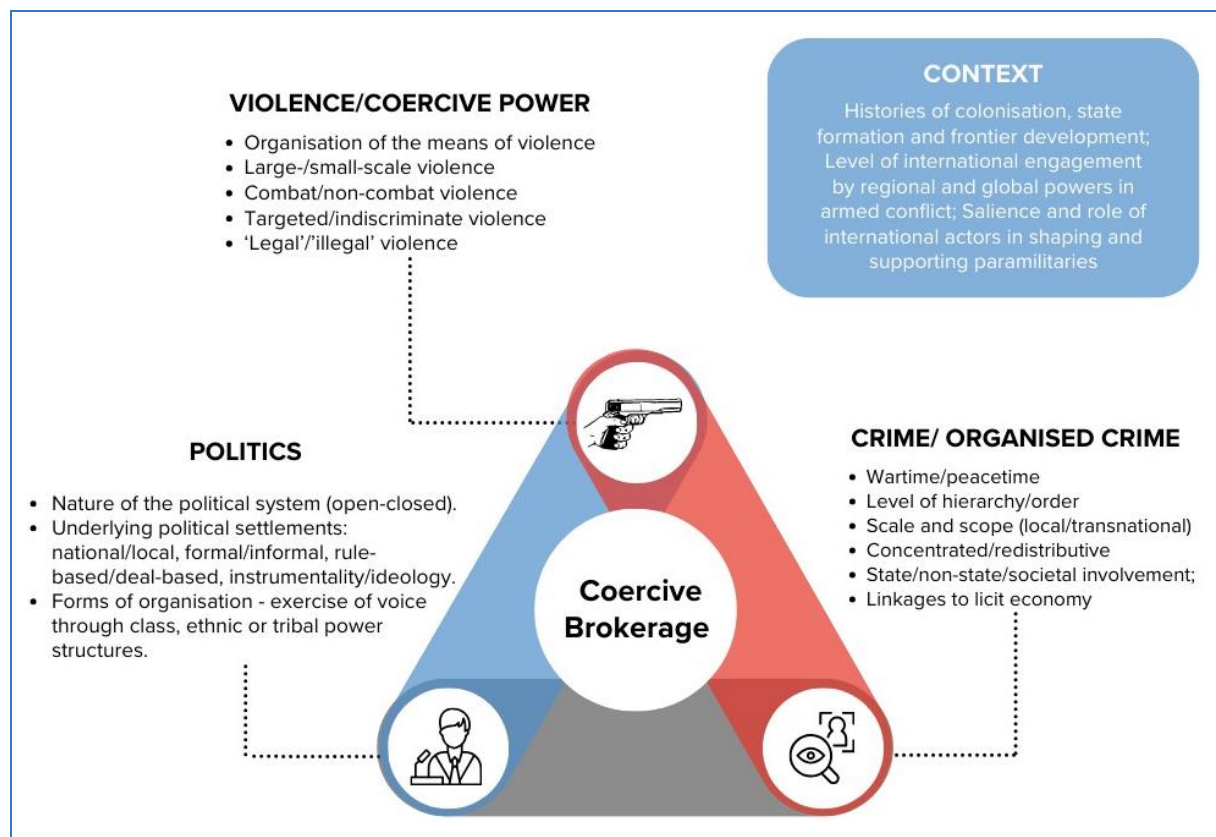
4. Coercive brokerage and the crime-politics nexus: comparative analysis

4.1. Comparative analysis: towards a comparative research agenda

The comparative insights outlined below are certainly not definitive, but aim to identify some important themes and questions for further exploration, and help contribute to an emerging comparative research agenda in this field.

The following diagram, introduced in Working Paper 1, locates coercive brokerage at the centre of a triangular relationship involving violence, illicit economies/organised crime, and politics. The dynamics of coercive brokerage can be analysed through the interplay between these three variables, which are in turn shaped by a range of contextual factors.

Figure 4: Coercive brokerage



4.2. Contextual variables

Four broad comparative observations can be made about contextual differences and similarities across the cases. Firstly, coercive brokerage is a common phenomenon that has emerged in quite different regional and national settings that are the product of different histories of colonisation, state formation, frontier development, globalisation, urbanisation, politics, and criminality/organised crime. The countries span low-income/least developed status (Afghanistan and Myanmar) through to upper- to middle-income status (Colombia). As argued in Working Paper 1, there is no straightforward correlation between state fragility or underdevelopment and the existence of paramilitarism.

Secondly, there are significant differences across the cases in terms of the salience and role of international actors in shaping and supporting paramilitaries, though it is important to recognise that, in all three cases, paramilitary groups emerged in environments shaped by extended histories of Cold War and post-Cold War militarisation in which foreign patrons supported both insurgents and counter-insurgents (McCoy, 2016). Afghanistan is the most ‘internationalised’ of the three cases; external actors, firstly the Soviets in the context of the Cold War, and then the US in the post 9/11 period, were instrumental in funding, equipping, training and even fighting alongside paramilitary groups. Although less visible in the case of Colombia, US support and training for paramilitaries was extremely significant in pursuing counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics goals, but when paramilitaries become more deeply involved in the drug economy, external support began to diminish. In contrast, in Myanmar, militia formation was entirely ‘owned’ by the state’s armed forces. Across the three cases there appears to be an inverse relationship between the level of international engagement and the effectiveness of paramilitaries in countering anti-state forces; domestic political elites are more attuned to the political marketplace, and internationalisation can distort the brokering arrangements that underpin frontier governance.

Thirdly, differing trajectories of state formation produce different kinds of state margins, leading to distinct paramilitary forms in these spaces. As already noted, frontier and borderland regions share some common features, linked to the ways in which they are governed and the role of violence. But states don’t treat all their margins equally – some frontier regions may be of more or less strategic/economic value than others, some may be located on a significant international border, or contain important but under-utilised resources. For example, in Putumayo, the frontier region was strategically important to the state, less because of the international border, than because of the presence of FARC, as well as valued resources in the form of oil and coca. Therefore, in this case, the ‘border effect’ was less salient than the ‘frontier effect’ and coercive brokerage revolved around maintaining relations with the centre – what Gutiérrez-Sanín (2023, p.1225) calls the ‘Bogota tie-in’. It was the absence of this strong tie-in that accounts for the failure of paramilitaries to break into the political system in Putumayo. However, where the borderland dynamic is more salient – as for example in Nimruz or Nangarhar in Afghanistan, and Kachin and Shan States in Myanmar, linked to the acute geopolitical sensitivities surrounding the border and its location as a key transshipment point, and where the border gradient is high (creating strong incentives for smuggling) – then coercive brokers focus a great deal of their efforts on controlling

key transport corridors and choke points. This gives them significant bargaining power vis-à-vis states on both sides of the border.

Fourthly, the dynamics of coercive brokerage are shaped by the social landscapes of the borderland/frontier regions, although this relationship varies according to how deeply embedded these brokers are in this social landscape and the extent to which they are beholden to or dependent on the state, or international sponsors. Colombian paramilitaries were the product of a class-based coalition involving rural elites linked to cattle ranching, narcos and central state politicians. In Putumayo they were largely a top-down phenomenon, with limited grounding in frontier society. In Afghanistan, post-2001 militias were largely created by international military actors, particularly special forces; however, they were shaped by tribal divisions and fault lines, which external actors struggled to understand. By favouring particular tribal militias over others, they inadvertently inflamed local conflicts and undermined counter-insurgency goals. In Myanmar, militias are composed of ethno-nationalist groups that straddle the border, and in this sense, are more deeply embedded in borderland society; this provides them with a measure of autonomy and bargaining power vis-à-vis the Myanmar and Chinese states.

4.3. Violence/coercive power and public authority

We move now to the apex of the triangle in Figure 4, and the relationship between public authority, violence and coercive brokerage. The catalyst for paramilitary formation and the emergence of coercive brokerage has been the escalation of large-scale violence directed against the state by rebel groups. This creates an existential crisis, threatening key interests within the dominant coalition, and undermining the legitimacy and viability of the state, particularly in borderland regions. In response, central state elites, and their international backers, mobilise militias to address this crisis.

Such groups are rarely created from scratch – they tend to be pre-existing specialists in violence, with the organisational capacity and weaponry to deploy ‘big violence’. On occasion, they can be dormant groups, such as some tribal militias in eastern Afghanistan, but with an injection of funding and weaponry, they are quickly deployed. Generally they are not used as frontline forces – lacking the firepower, or ostensibly the discipline and organisation of regular forces – and they are most commonly deployed to: hold territory that has been cleared by the military; protect key infrastructure; collect intelligence; deploy exemplary violence (that the state cannot be held accountable for); intimidate, cow and terrorise populations; strengthen relations with civil society; and propagandise on the behalf of the government and against rebel groups.

The cases also show how paramilitary violence and its distributive effects vary across space and time. In Colombia, militias have been responsible for exemplary forms of violence against civilians, including major massacres; in Myanmar, the Army has been the main perpetrator of the most egregious violence against local populations. In some areas of Myanmar, militias have provided protection from forced recruitment and extortion by the Army and ethnic armed organisations, but in others they have actively recruited for the Army. In Nangarhar, Afghanistan, militias have in some areas provided security for their local communities against insurgencies, whilst in others they have committed abuses and terrorised communities.

Coercive brokers operate in liminal spaces, below the radar, and this constitutes their chief comparative advantage in prosecuting 'dirty' counter-insurgency campaigns. At the same time their deployment often involves a short-term/long-term trade-off: a Faustian bargain in which urgent solutions to a state crisis may inadvertently contribute to a longer-term process of state-weakening by further fragmenting the means of violence and undermining the legitimacy of the state, linked to pervasive human rights abuses and the growing involvement of such groups in criminal activities. For example, in Colombia, as paramilitaries became more independent and new economic and political agendas emerged, this generated new collective action problems and social impasses that the state was forced to respond to.

States may attempt to deal with paramilitaries that have become too autonomous by placing constraints on or regularising their forces, or alternatively, demobilising them. In relation to the former, these constraints may emerge, to some degree, from societal actors – where paramilitaries are more embedded in their borderland social milieu, then tribal, ethnic or religious solidarities may play a role in moderating militia behaviour. Alternatively, state or international actors may seek to domesticate or place fetters on paramilitary forces, through training programmes, incorporation into regular forces, or setting up screening processes for recruitment – as happened, albeit largely on paper, in relation to the Afghan Local Police.

Perhaps the most successful example of paramilitary demobilisation took place in Colombia, where a confluence of factors led to a demand for urgent action from the state and its US backers. When paramilitaries became sufficiently powerful as to threaten the dominant political settlement, as such groups forged coalitions with narcos, and successfully competed in national and local elections, there was a strong push back from the US and central state elites, leading to a systematic, national-level demobilisation programme. This did not prevent the re-emergence of a new wave of paramilitaries in the wake of the peace process, but it did address the immediate threat to the established elite.

In Afghanistan, militia demobilisation inadvertently had the opposite effect, leaving the state vulnerable to the eventual Taliban takeover. President Ashraf Ghani's strategy of centralising power and systematically dispensing with coercive brokers or regional strongmen – at a time when external funding to maintain these relationships was declining – had catastrophic consequences, leading to the unravelling of the ruling political settlement, and dramatically turned the balance of power in the Taliban's favour.

4.4. Illicit economies and organised crime

Engagement in illicit economies and organised crime is often viewed as the preserve of non-state or para-state actors – this is a misrepresentation, as states tend to be a key agent and in many cases the dominant player in these activities. A functional equilibrium often emerges in situations of protracted conflict and illicit economies, in which central state elites benefit from 'liminal' borderland or frontier regions, where accumulation – through violent dispossession – can happen more readily and quickly than in other more legible and easily accessible regions. Coercive brokerage plays a key role in facilitating forms of extraction and dispossession and maintaining or regulating this functional equilibrium.

Notwithstanding the agency of state actors within criminal economies, several factors mitigate against monopoly control of illicit markets, particularly in frontier regions. Firstly, because the state and private sector cannot officially or formally be directly involved with illicit economies, this to some extent acts against the concentration of wealth and power. Because power tends to be fragmented in frontier regions, informal and illicit economies can have redistributive or diffusion effects. For example, the cultivation of illicit drugs involves many poor households who benefit from the price premium that comes with illegality; informal/illegal cross-border trade involves multiple actors from transporters to border guards, from traders to government officials, all of whom take cuts and this money filters into the local borderland economy.

Secondly, paramilitarism, as a state-based strategy, fragments the means of violence, and opens up access to rent-seeking opportunities. Paramilitaries are encouraged to rely to a large degree on self-financing, or 'living off the land' – with illicit economies being a key source of rent.

Thirdly, paramilitaries are commonly in competition with other armed groups, including insurgents vying for control of illicit markets. The regulation of licit and illicit activities is based on control of territory and where this is control is fragmented, again it guards against the emergence of monopolies. The existence of rebel groups, such as FARC or the Taliban (2001 – 2021), means there is competition in terms of regulating and profiting from the illicit economy. This creates a delicate balance to be managed by coercive brokers; the existence of such groups justifies the continued role of paramilitaries, but if the rebel groups are too powerful and control too much territory and illicit markets, then paramilitaries have limited bargaining power vis-à-vis the state, as Acero argues in relation to Putumayo.

Fourthly, the governance and regulation of illicit economies vary according to the dynamics of conflict. During periods of high intensity conflict involving shifting front lines, militia behaviour tends to be more spoils-oriented and predatory, whereas in contexts where coercive brokers have more consolidated territorial control, then regulation of illicit economies can be more systematised and predictable and may positively affect the standing and legitimacy of such actors. Over time, paramilitary groups may develop larger economic (licit and illicit) portfolios, particularly in key frontier or borderland boom towns, where control of these enclaves becomes a stepping stone for gaining a foothold in transnational organised crime.

The more powerful and successful paramilitaries leverage their control of frontier enclaves to develop strong transnational relationships and networks; for example, Myanmar militias with their close links to Chinese businessmen in Yunnan, and the Afghan militias in Nangarhar with their business contacts across the border in Pakistan.

In some cases, such as Colombia and Myanmar, coercive brokers have played a role in securing frontier regions for extractivism, involving international companies – with concessions often being franchised out by the state, and/or contracted out by transnational corporations. However, in Afghanistan, protracted conflict has deterred international investors, unlike in Myanmar and Colombia, where paramilitaries have been crucial in extending markets and carving out zones of control for 'adventure capitalism' involving, for example, oil companies, cattle ranching, jade mining or banana plantations.

International policies and interventions, such as drugs prohibition, may inadvertently boost the profit margins of paramilitary groups; counter-narcotics policies play a role in boosting prices and create a demand for non-state regulation of illicit activities, as well as enabling such groups to position themselves as the protectors of an 'illicit peasantry'.

The level of organisation and institutionalisation of criminal activities varies across time and space, reflecting state capacities for oversight, the nature of local and regional markets, and the degree and intensity of armed conflict. In relatively high capacity regimes, such as Colombia, transnational crime is more 'organised' and regulated from a distance by central state actors, or by powerful and consolidated rebel groups. Illicit borderland economies in such cases are deeply integrated into criminal structures and markets in metropolitan centres, at a national and regional level.

4.5. Politics and the organised crime connection

Although paramilitaries vary in terms of their relationship to formal or informal politics, *all* paramilitary organisations have political effects because of their impacts on the balance of power, the distribution of resources, and coalition management. Their various roles, which are essentially about supporting dominant power arrangements – propagandising on the behalf of the state, protecting infrastructure, supporting development projects, or managing security in elections – are all inherently political. Coercive brokerage, across all three countries, is central to how the political marketplace works, even though violent entrepreneurs may not be part of the formal political process.

However, several paramilitary leaders across the cases have gone beyond this more passive role into actively leveraging their engagement in illicit activities to pursue a wider political agenda and career. This on occasion has involved assuming key positions in formal politics at the national or local levels, particularly in environments where access to the means of violence (and having the revenues to purchase weapons and retain troops) is necessary for their political agendas to be taken seriously. And at the same time, in contexts where there is a thriving illicit economy this can provide the 'start-up' capital to get involved in formal politics – to fund election campaigns, buy votes, extend patronage relations – and so boost one's position and bargaining power in the political marketplace.

Illicit finance can also provide the capital to fund public goods, social works and basic infrastructure, particularly in frontier and borderland regions where the state has failed to provide such services. This enables paramilitaries to build wider societal coalitions and support structures. For example, in Myanmar, some local militias have invested in education as well as cultural and religious institutions, and so in some respects have taken on the mantle of the state.

Therefore, the boundaries between criminality, politics and legitimacy are not straightforward, and are often counter-intuitive. Getting involved in illicit activities, regulating them to ensure the benefits are widely shared, and investing some of the proceeds into the development of borderland regions, can boost the legitimacy of, and support for, coercive brokers. But there is a fine balance and, conversely, involvement in

organised crime can delegitimise and criminalise those involved and generate barriers to participating in formal politics, particularly when international agendas and interests enter the mix – for example, the US targeting of ‘drug kingpins’ through targeted killings in Afghanistan or extradition in Colombia.

The ability of coercive brokers to make the transition into formal politics varies across cases, reflecting the different political systems in which they are embedded. Colombia’s democratic, but often violent, political system provided both openings and constraints for paramilitary leaders aiming to break into the system. As Acero notes, successful coercive brokers tended to: (1) build up their capacity for large violence; (2) generate a resource base through the illicit economy; (3) use these resources to break into the political system; and (4) extend their constituency and vote base through leveraging government programmes and patronage. Their ability to follow this trajectory was very regionally specific. In Urabá, the *Autodefensas Gaitanistas* became a key force shaping local and regional politics and even oversaw the implementation of a major USAID alternative development programme. But in Putumayo, a history of social mobilisation and distinct coalitional politics and the strong presence of the FARC prevented paramilitaries from becoming an enduring force.

In Myanmar, an authoritarian, military-dominated regime prevents paramilitaries from becoming a significant political force at the central state level, but militias have become key political players at the local level, because of their bargaining power linked to control of key border crossings, means of violence, and their wider territorial control in borderland regions.

In Afghanistan, despite its democratic constitution, the political system was in a state of more or less constant churn following the Bonn Agreement of 2001, up until the downfall of the Republic in 2021. The centralisation of power in the President’s office, the weakness of parliament, the lack of coherent political parties, and the escalating insurgency created an extremely volatile political marketplace, making it difficult for coercive brokers to build a solid political platform. General Dostam, an Uzbek ex-militia leader who formed an Uzbek-dominated political party and entered national level politics, was, for a time, one of the few exceptions – though he fled the country, along with other central state elites, at the time of the Taliban takeover.

Another key dimension to understanding paramilitary trajectories into politics – and one that has been under-researched – comprises the biographies, roles and motivations of individual militia leaders. Studying them comparatively can potentially generate new insights into why and how some coercive brokers end up taking on formal political roles and others do not.

Therefore, there is a need to rethink simplistic characterisations of paramilitaries as spoilers or self-serving actors, motivated by self-enrichment and predation. This is not to argue that all paramilitaries are political actors who seek to enrol public support and have a worked out political programme. However, the case studies show that a public authority lens helps nuance understanding of the trajectories and motivations of these organisations.

5. Conclusion

Here we return to the core questions underpinning our research on coercive brokerage. The fourth research question – on policy combinations that can address coercive brokerage in conflict-affected borderlands – is addressed in the separate policy brief.

5.1. What is the relationship between coercive brokers, public authority and frontier governance?

5.1.1. *Frontiers are key sites of paramilitary formation*

Frontiers are, as we have shown, ‘rough and tumble’ places where public authority is contested, the means of violence fragmented and there exists a plurality of would-be-statebuilders.

The costs of governing such regions directly are high – often too high – for the state, and consequently frontier governance frequently involves outsourcing the means of violence and other basic state functions to paramilitary forces. As shown in the case studies, this form of mediated rule produces a ragged geography of state, para-state and non/anti-state spaces; direct rule may only be imposed and experienced along key transport corridors, strategic enclaves (population centres or sites of valuable resources) and key border crossing points.

Paramilitary formation is emblematic of the role of frontier zones as sites of innovation and laboratories of change, and these experiments in frontier governance are rarely sequestered to the frontiers – they have significant ‘boomerang effects’, shaping the wider polity and economy in fundamental ways.

All three case studies chart a long history of militia formation in the context of large-scale armed resistance to the state. Even prior to the outbreak of armed conflict, these were regions where the state footprint was absent, shaky or contested; mediated statehood has tended to be the norm and irregular forces a perennial feature of the frontier landscape.

5.1.2. *Coercive brokerage is a defining feature of frontier governance*

Although paramilitaries are often deployed for expedient, short-term reasons, over time a steady state or equilibrium of mediated rule emerges. The reasons for this lie partly in the nature of brokerage – brokers have a level of autonomy and agency; they carve out territory and regulate markets and populations. At the same time, maintaining these zones as liminal spaces can also be advantageous, for example by allowing economic activities to remain unregulated.

Coercive brokerage provides a lens for studying the co-evolution of states and paramilitaries over time. It is not just that states create paramilitaries – paramilitaries create, or at least transform, the state. The privatisation of security provision leads to

the emergence of increasingly autonomous specialists in violence, and coercive brokerage can become part of the DNA of the state. In Afghanistan, for example, militia forces have repeatedly played a role in fragmenting the state, ultimately leading to the downfall of successive regimes.

5.1.3. Different types of states and frontier regions produce different types of paramilitaries

Forms of public authority and the role of paramilitaries vary across countries and frontier regions. Subnational variation *within* cases is striking: in Putumayo paramilitaries were primarily outsiders, unlike many other frontier regions in Colombia. This lack of embeddedness – and lack of state or societal constraints on their rule – contributed to abusive behaviour of these groups. In contrast, in Afghanistan and Myanmar, militia formations tended to emerge from the frontier regions themselves, and this embeddedness meant they were more responsive to borderland societies.

Paramilitaries also vary over time as well as space. Many emerged in the context of large-scale violence against the state and were deployed as combatants targeting anti-state groups – but over time they were deployed in post-ceasefire policing, intelligence gathering, holding territory, and even playing social and development roles. In some cases, militias have viewed themselves as reducing/de-escalating violence by providing local security and limiting forced recruitment and extortion within the areas they control.

In sum, to understand the relationships between coercive brokerage, public authority and frontier governance and how these vary across space and time, we need to take into account:

- a) the nature of the conflict and paramilitary origins;
- b) the nature of the state, the armed challengers to the state and the political system within which paramilitaries function;
- c) the kind of frontier region, its history of rule and its structural features including its political topography, social landscape and resource profile;
- d) the history of militia formation, its leadership, social make up, capacities and embeddedness; and
- e) the synapses or points of friction across which brokerage takes place.

5.2. How, and with what effects, do paramilitaries become involved with illicit economies and organised crime?

5.2.1. *Frontiers can have a comparative advantage in illegality*

Across all three cases, transnational organised crime has developed out of sets of relationships and activities that emerged during protracted war economies.

Frontiers provide a conducive environment for illicit economies to emerge from, since they are close to international borders; they are liminal and illegible spaces; and there is a multitude of specialists in violence able to provide protection, as well as a range of financial services and infrastructures that have been field tested in high-risk environments.

Furthermore, state authority is often decentralised and central oversight is limited, allowing for some actors within the state to work with and seek to profit from illicit economies, rather than try to police them.

5.2.2. *Post-war transitions can lead to a new nexus between paramilitaries and illicit economies*

Frontiers can also be spaces of untapped wealth waiting to be exploited, and post-war moments provide new opportunities for resource extraction and/or illegal activities. This can open up opportunities for paramilitaries that can guarantee security and stability in the short term, as well as providing the means of violence needed to open up spaces and manage relations with local populations.

Criminalised war economies may mutate into criminalised peace economies – but the shift to transnational organised crime is not automatic – post-war, or no-war no-peace economies, may continue to be unruly and fragmented – it depends on the nature of the state, the underlying political settlement and the social order that emerges.

Paramilitary involvement in illicit economies is in part linked to the fact that they are on the ground when new opportunities are opening up – but it is also linked to the strategies deployed by state actors when they engage with paramilitaries – they are fighting war on the cheap and these groups are given the leeway and are indeed encouraged to live off the land and to exploit local economic opportunities.

5.2.3. *There are different paramilitary pathways into, and relationships with, illicit economies/transnational organised crime*

Paramilitaries' relationships with illicit economies vary across time and space, including opportunistic predation, systematic taxation, protection rackets, joint ventures with local and transnational investors, and mafia-type set-ups in which they take over a particular market within their area of control. There is also significant variation in how paramilitaries regulate illicit economies; for instance, in Colombia, paramilitaries and the FARC managed the drug trade in different ways and regulated different parts of the

supply chain. Across all the cases, territorial control was central to paramilitaries' capacity to engage in illicit activities and to pursue political agendas. This marked an important distinction between those organisations involved in the drug trade as a business enterprise – gangs, foreign investors, drug-trafficking organisations (or 'narcos') – and coercive brokers who aspired to govern local territories. In Colombia, for example, paramilitaries and narcos often operated in the same territories and formed alliances, but they had different interests, ambitions, constituencies and ways of operating.

When comparing the three cases, it is also clear that there are differences in the level and scope of paramilitary engagement in organised crime. In Afghanistan, engagement tended to be at a low level, mostly focused on cross-border smuggling and controlling regional trade. Paramilitaries were less involved with the big players controlling the wholesale end of the business, including major traders with links to Kabul, Dubai, and Pakistan. On the other hand, in Colombia, paramilitaries operate at a higher level in the commodity chain and within the political system. Organised crime is more institutionalised, regulated, and hierarchical compared with the more fluid and decentralised relationships observed in Afghanistan.

5.2.4. Relations with the state are central to how paramilitaries become involved in organised crime

In some cases, paramilitaries become involved in illicit activities because there is almost no state oversight and these organisations can act autonomously. However, in most cases, the relationship with state authorities is central to understanding how paramilitaries become involved in crime. In Colombia, for example, having a 'Bogota tie-in' is crucial for paramilitaries to establish rent-sharing agreements and elite pacts, as well as for building coalitions, addressing collective action problems and providing protection. In Myanmar, ethnic armed organisations fighting against the central government are also involved in illegal activities, but what makes paramilitary coercive brokers valuable partners for drug-trafficking organisations is their relationship with the state, which prevents them being targeted, enables smooth travel through government checkpoints, and offers access to licit business opportunities.

This has important policy implications. In contexts where militias have been conducting illicit activities autonomously, the state may look to rein in some of these activities as part of wider efforts to consolidate its authority. However, in other cases, increasing state presence may not lead to a reduction in illicit activities and may even provide further impetus for criminality.

5.3. What is the relationship between paramilitaries, organised crime and politics?

5.3.1. There is no simple binary between crime and politics: paramilitaries involved in illicit activities may still have political agendas

The case studies demonstrate the need to eschew simplistic assumptions about politics and criminality as being automatically separate and opposed spheres of activity. The boundary between them is fuzzy, contingent, deeply contextualised and constantly changing across time and space. Of course, not all paramilitaries have an interest in politics. However, for some, engagement in illicit activities can provide a resource base to pursue wider political agendas. This is especially apparent in contexts where the means of violence (and thereby having the revenue to purchase weapons and retain troops) is necessary for their political agendas to be taken seriously. However, pathways into politics that involve engagement in illicit activities also entail risks. This includes delegitimisation (among local populations and nationally or internationally) and targeting by the state or international actors.

There is a need to avoid lazy and misleading narratives that automatically characterise paramilitaries as spoilers or self-serving actors, motivated by self-enrichment and predation. This is not to say that all paramilitaries are political actors who seek to enrol public support and have a worked out political programme. However, our case studies do show that a public authority lens helps nuance understanding of the trajectories and motivations of these organisations.

5.3.2. Paramilitaries' pathways into politics vary, as does the extent to which these pathways are shaped by their involvement in illicit activities

Paramilitaries' pathways into politics vary based on the distinct historical trajectories of their formation, the specific frontier contexts they operate in, the political systems they are a part of, and the illicit economies they engage in. Some paramilitaries become involved in organised crime in parallel to, or as a springboard for, pursuing political power, while others use politics as a means to protect their illegal activities. Some groups mutate into organisations focused primarily on criminal activities, while some have no involvement in organised crime at all.

Paramilitaries also operate across different political scales and demonstrate different levels of ambition. In Colombia, paramilitaries sought to influence national elections, with strong ties at the centre being important for them to pursue their own statebuilding agendas. In Afghanistan and Myanmar, paramilitaries have been associated more with localist agendas – in Afghanistan they have often had a strong ethnic or tribal agenda, linked to the desire for autonomy which has sometimes translated into a political programme, advocating state reform and decentralisation.

It is also important not to forget how international agendas and funding can play a significant role in shaping paramilitary pathways into politics. For example, in Colombia, the war on drugs and the war on terror played an important role in the emergence of paramilitaries as right-wing groups associated with an anti-communist and anti-peasant

ideology. Indeed, paramilitary politics has often been about disabling other political voices and agendas; in Colombia paramilitaries have targeted peasant organisations, killed civil society leaders and have banned trade unions and cooperatives in their territories.

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